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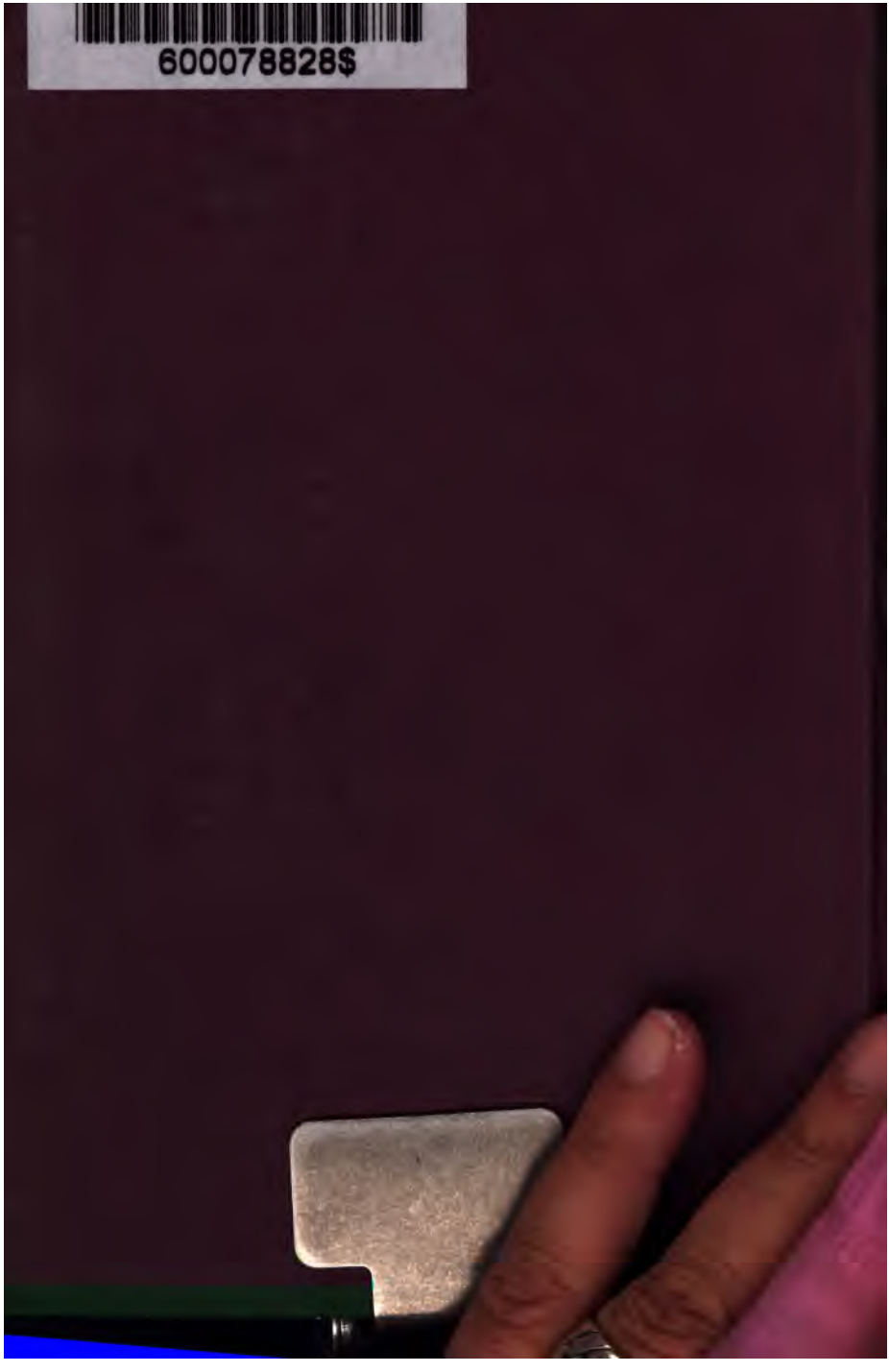

MAUD LESLIE.

VOL. II.

MAUD LESLIE.

BY

LADY CHARLES THYNNE,

AUTHOR OF

"OFF THE LINE,"

&c. &c.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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MAUD LESLIE.

CHAPTER I.

AFTER Miss Carysfort's departure, life fell very flat and heavily upon Maud.

"I cannot possibly bear this!" she thought. "I shall lose my senses soon, if this state of stagnation continues. I must go home; and if Stuart will not take me, I must go alone. I must see papa and mamma. It is so long since I left home." Hurst Manor was still home to Maud. "It is all those tiresome old women that

have come between me and Stuart, and have made him so different. I do wish they would go, whatever he may say, or that we could go abroad—anywhere away from this. I must see what can be done;" and with these thoughts in her mind, Maud's spirits rose. A battle of any kind would be a relief from stagnation, and the thought of one was decidedly pleasant to Maud in her present mood.

"Turner wants me to ride over to Horfield to look over the farm with him. He is to meet me there. Would you like to ride with me, Maud? It is some distance, but what I have to do will not take me long; and you could sit with old Mrs. Purton. She is a charming old lady—one of the tenants you have never seen."

"I should like it very much," said Maud brightly. "It is such a blessing to have anything to do here."

Unfortunately Maud seldom waited to think before she spoke, and this very needless observation undid all the good of her ready acquiescence to her husband's proposal, and his brow became instantly dark and clouded, though he made no reply.

"You meant me to ride, I suppose?" inquired Maud, rather timidly; for, though she would not have acknowledged it even to herself, she was growing decidedly afraid of her husband.

"Just as you please. I can drive you in the phaeton, if you like."

"Oh, no; I like riding best." Then, suddenly remembering what a good oppor-

tunity driving would be for any discussion of plans, said—"No, upon the whole, I would rather you drove me, Stuart, if you like it as well."

Mr. Leslie rang the bell to order the carriage, while Maud ran upstairs to prepare for her drive. She had to wait a few minutes while her husband was giving some orders to his bailiff, and as waiting was one of the things most trying to Maud's impatient nature, she suddenly thought it would be amusing to take a short experimental drive, so that, when her husband came to the door, neither his wife nor the phaeton was to be seen.

"Mrs. Leslie said she would drive as far as the lodge and back," said the footman, answering his master's look of consternation.

"Very imprudent," he muttered, as Maud came quickly up to the door, having descried him from some distance standing upon the steps.

"I wanted to see if I could drive, Stuart," she said gaily, "and I think that I have done very well, considering."

"It was a very rash experiment," he replied, taking the reins out of her hand, as he seated himself by her side. "Pray do not repeat it; you might easily have had an accident. That young horse is not easy to drive."

"Oh, the groom was with me, so nothing was likely to happen. I think I should like to drive—you can teach me."

"Then you must promise me never to try unless I am with you."

"Very well," she replied pettishly. "I

think that you never like me to do as much as other people."

"I cannot combat fancies, Maud," he said gravely. "You have no reason to think so."

Maud sighed. This was a bad beginning for her scheme of talking him over to her own views about going abroad. Not that in reality it made the slightest difference. Stuart Leslie might accede to his wife's wishes from expediency, or even from affection, but her opinion did not carry the smallest weight. He was wrong in underrating, as he did, her mental powers, and for not perceiving the practical common-sense that was underlying her childish petulance.

They drove some distance before Maud

could frame her request in any way that satisfied her.

"Do let us settle something about our plans, Stuart," said Maud, in a would-be indifferent tone. "When shall we go away? I mean," she continued, as her husband looked up, as if wishing for further information without speaking, "I should like to give mamma some idea as to when we are likely to be with her."

"I really do not know, Maud. Is there any especial reason for settling these important things to-day?"

"It is a very important thing to me," replied Maud, with rising colour, though she tried to speak calmly. "It is so long since I was at home, and you said—you

promised—that you would take me abroad, and I thought that we might go home on our way."

"It is rather too late now to be thinking of starting for Italy. It would be much too hot by the time we could arrive. We might, perhaps, go next Winter, if you wished it."

"Next Winter, Stuart!—nearly a year! You cannot mean that we should stay here till next Winter?"

"I am sorry you dislike your home so much, Maud," said Stuart. "I was afraid that I was much too old and stupid to be your only companion."

"You know it is not that," said poor Maud, her eyes full of tears; "it is that I am stupid, and your mother does not like me, and so makes you——"

"Makes me what?" he asked, in his hardest, driest tone.

"Different from what you were; oh! so different," said Maud passionately, "that I long to see them all at home."

"I do not suppose there need be any difficulty about that. I shall be obliged to be in London later, and I can leave you there on my way."

"But I want to go to London, too. There is so much I want to see there, and that you promised to show me as well as to take me abroad," said Maud indignantly.

"It is an expensive thing to embark in a house in London for the season. Quite beyond my means, I fear."

"Then we can go to an hotel or lodging. Only for mercy's sake, Stuart, don't go

away and leave me here, or I undoubtedly should——"

"Should what, I wonder?"

"Run away, I believe," she said, but in so low a voice that her husband did not catch her words, and as by this time they had reached the farm there was no time for further conversation.

"What a pretty old house!" exclaimed Maud, as they drove up; "it is quite unlike any that I ever saw."

It was a long, low, old-fashioned house, with two gables of black wood and plaster, built as some houses still are in the north, and in some old towns, especially Chester. There was behind the house a high yew hedge, sheltering a large garden from the north winds. Mrs. Purton came out to open the wicket that led to the house.

"Very glad to see you, sir," she said, as Stuart shook hands with her. "It's long since you have been this way."

"I have brought Mrs. Leslie to see you at last, Mrs. Purton. What will you do, Maud? stay in the carriage, or wait for me in the house?"

"I should like to go into that charming old house, if I may," replied Maud, turning to Mrs. Purton with her most winning smile.

"Then I will go round the farm with Philip, Mrs. Purton. Is he at home?"

"He is handy, sir—in the yard. Reuben, go and fetch your master."

Mr. Leslie asked some questions of the old woman, while Maud stood by admiring her.

Mrs. Purton must have been a very

lovely woman, and still retained the traces of her good looks, which were enhanced by a beauty that belongs to old age, a beauty very different from that of youth, but often more pleasing, and even more perfect. Her close cap and silver hair, with her small, refined features, on which long years of suffering had marked their impress, gave her an unusual attraction in Maud's eyes. She stood wondering what had been her history, for her large blue eyes had no faded look, but were keen with perception and intelligence. The expression of her face was that of patient resignation, and betokened a quiet, unruffled peace, which is rarely to be found except among those who are "stricken in years." It reminded Maud of moonlight and its soft rays.

"I am so sorry that I did not know

you were coming, madam," she said respectfully, as she led her into a cold, clean, and somewhat comfortless parlour. "I should have had a fire ready for you, and would have prepared luncheon for you. Mr. Stuart lunched here very often in the old days."

"Then you have known Mr. Leslie long," said Maud, suddenly grasping at the chance of hearing something of her husband's early life.

"Ever since he was born. I was one of the first as ever held him in my arms. Then, as a boy, he rode over most days to fish or to cricket with my lads, before they were taken from me."

"Did you lose your children young?" said Maud timidly. "How hard for you!"

"It seemed so then; but God knew what was best for them and me. But I had lost their father the year before, and I felt lonesome enough."

"But you have a son? Has not Mr. Leslie gone out with your son?"

"Yes, Philip was left to me, and a girl, who has been married many years. I don't often see her now, but I am thankful for those I have, and all our lives are ordered for us as is best, I know."

"Then you knew Mr. Leslie's father?" said Maud, showing by her eager face how much interest she took in all Mrs. Purton could tell her.

"Yes, poor gentleman! he had a suffering life at best, and was as gentle and patient as an angel. Mr. Stuart was but a lad when he died."

"I should think he must have been very unlike his wife, then," said Maud abruptly, rather thinking aloud than intending to comment upon her mother-in-law.

Mrs. Purton looked at her for a moment in silence, and then said, with a smile,

"You know, Mrs. Leslie was a deal older than Mr. Arthur, Mr. Stuart's father, but she loved him as the apple of her eye, and was a clever woman and a capital nurse. It was that as brought them together, as perhaps you know."

"Indeed I do not, Mrs. Purton. I shall be so grateful for anything you can tell me."

Mrs. Purton then gave Maud a sketch of Arthur Leslie's early life, and of the accident in Scotland, adding, "Mrs. Leslie

may seem a stern lady at times, but she has a kind heart."

"Perhaps she has, and it may be evident to those she likes," said Maud bitterly. "But as she does not like me, I was not aware of it."

"I cannot believe that possible," said the old woman, laying her hand gently upon Maud's arm. "It's bad for both if you think that; and I did hope that the poor lady would have comfort in Mr. Stuart's wife in her old age."

This was an entirely new aspect of the case to Maud. She had expected, or rather hoped for, affection from Stuart's mother, but that any sort of duty devolved upon her in the matter had never once occurred to her. Perhaps, if she had been loving and gentle, she might have won Mrs. Leslie's

heart, her husband might have been different, and her home happier. Maud had been accustomed to receive all her life, but for her to give in the first instance had never for a moment crossed her brain.

She stood pondering over the ideas which Mrs. Purton's words had raised in her mind till she heard voices approaching, and, suddenly rousing herself from her reverie, said quickly, holding out her hand—

"Thank you very much for all you have said. I never thought I could be a comfort to anyone—least of all to Mrs. Leslie. I should like to come and talk to you again about it."

"My dear young lady, you could not give me a greater pleasure; and if ever I

could be of the smallest service to you, I should be thankful, for your sake as well as for those I've served so long; and as to comforting others, everyone has a work in the world either for better or for worse."

"I am sure you can help me. I shall come again soon," said Maud, going to the garden-gate, where her husband was waiting for her.

"You must come at once, Maud," he said, rather impatiently. "My mother will be waiting for us for luncheon, as it is."

This reference to Mrs. Leslie almost overturned Maud's newly-formed resolutions, but she made no reply, and got at once into the carriage.

"What a charming old lady Mrs. Purton is, Stuart!" said Maud, as they drove off. "I am so sorry that I did not make her acquaintance sooner."

"She is an excellent woman, and quite a character in her way; but I should never have thought that she was much in your line, Maud."

"Why, I wonder? And what do you consider my line, Stuart?" she said, looking up in his face with a smile that even Stuart Leslie could not resist. "Is it that I always dislike excellent people, and find them disagreeable?"

"Not exactly; but Mrs. Purton is too grave for you. She is too old, and has had much sorrow in her life."

"That is why I like her, and why she

understands other people's trials," said Maud, as she jumped out of the carriage and ran up the steps into the hall with a lighter heart than usual.

She threw off her little cloth jacket and opened the dining-room door, where Mrs. Leslie stood looking grimly at the luncheon on the table without attempting to begin.

"I am so sorry, Mrs. Leslie; I am afraid we are late. But why did you wait?" said Maud penitently.

"I never sit down without the lady of the house," replied Mrs. Leslie stiffly.

"Oh, dear no, to be sure not; could not think of it," murmured Miss Campbell.

"I was not aware that you were expect-

ed to think about it, Abigail," said Mrs. Leslie sharply.

"Do let us begin now," said Maud, sitting down; "here is Stuart."

"Why did you wait, mother?" he said, taking the place Maud vacated for him. "I wish you would not."

"I have explained why, Stuart," she replied, with the air of a martyr.

"I have been telling Mrs. Leslie how sorry we were, Stuart," said Maud courageously, "and it was your fault really for staying so long at the farm."

"Quite. I acknowledge it, so pray forgive us, mother!"

The luncheon proceeded, according to custom, in solemn silence, and Maud had plenty of time for meditation, and to

wonder if Mrs. Leslie's antagonism to her had been originally her own fault, and, if so, how it could be remedied.

CHAPTER II.

THE sun was setting in a gorgeous panoply of purple and flame colour, the angelus had just rung out from all the churches in Florence, and every steeple and tower was bathed in golden light. It rested on the distant hills, intensifying every shade of colour till it faded into purple distance. The sun descended slowly below the horizon that day, as if it loved to linger over the city, over every stately palace, and the campanile of the Duomo—that unequalled specimen of

human art—"the tower that Giotto built."

It was a sunset never to be seen out of a southern clime, yet now these last rays of the sun were being carefully excluded from a badly-built house between Florence and Fiesole. There were no "jalousies," as in most of the houses in that neighbourhood, only a heavy curtain, which a young girl drew across the window as the sunlight fell across a bed on which lay a woman weak and emaciated, and apparently in the last stage of consumption. But this curtain excluded air as well as light, and the sick woman gasped as with a sudden sense of suffocation. The child, who appeared about fourteen years of age, looked up alarmed.

"The sun will soon be down, Bianca mia," said a middle-aged woman, who was

preparing some food in a corner of the room; "the air is everything to her now."

The girl drew the curtain back, and, looking out, exclaimed—

"Here he is!—here he is!—the good padre coming down the road. May I run down and ask him to come in?"

"Yes, child, if you like, but of a surety he is coming in. Padre Antonio does not neglect any of his flock."

"How is the poor lady to-day, my child?" said the old man, as the girl stood at the door ready to greet him.

She shook her head sorrowfully.

"Bad as bad can be. Only you and Sister Monica do her any good. You are coming in?"

"Yes," he replied, with his benevolent smile, as he laid his hand on Bianca's head

as she knelt for his blessing before she ascended the small staircase. "Go up and say that I am here."

"Elena knows, for I said that I would stop you; but I will go up and put a chair by the bedside."

Maria Scevola had been long an invalid, and for many months Padre Antonio had seen her constantly, and administered spiritual consolation. After his first greeting, Elena left the room, and the padre and the sick woman were left for some time alone. As he rose to go, a beseeching look from her caused him to sit down again.

"You have other duties; you cannot stay longer with me," she said feebly.

"I can always be where I am needed,"

he replied kindly. "Is it about Bianca? She is a good child."

"Oh! Padre Antonio, you cannot tell what the thought of leaving that child is to me. I lie awake night after night wondering and dreading what will become of her."

"Where is your faith, Maria? Surely the Father of the fatherless and our dear Lady will protect her."

"But Sister Monica thinks she may have a vocation later. Would it not be best to let her go at once into religion?"

Padre Antonio shook his head.

"My child, it would not be right to take advantage of her youth and loneliness. Then, you know, she has a nearer rela-

tion, who must be consulted as to her destiny."

"I know that," said the sick woman, sighing heavily. "That is my great trouble, my great grief, to think that she will be left to the care of one who has shown so little interest or affection for his child; and one who is a foreigner and a heretic. God forgive me, if it was the worldliness of my heart that induced me to consent to my daughter's marriage. If so, I have been sufficiently punished for it!"

"It is very doubtful if you could have prevented it, my child; and regrets now only weaken you, body and soul. Trust to Him who knows us all, and governs the world. He will protect the fatherless."

"But you will take charge of her, father. She will always obey you, and you will never let her renounce her country or her faith?"

"Be satisfied, Maria. While I live I will do all I can for the child, for indeed she is dear to me as well as to you. I will write to the Signor telling him of your illness, and will inform you of his reply. Bianca is a good and gentle child; beware of putting difficulties into her life by making her duty to her father a painful or irksome task. Now you are weary; I will leave you. Try to sleep."

The sick woman was too much exhausted to reply, and, though the troubled expression had not passed from her countenance, she lay still and silent, with closed eyes, in painful thought.

Padre Antonio had a short conversation with Elena, and then walked slowly away. Bianca watched his departure with decided feelings of dissatisfaction. She thought he might have had some last words for her. He was one of the few people to whom the lonely child could talk without reserve, and the fact of his not having remembered her was in itself a mortification. She crept quietly back to the sick woman's room, but she was lying with her eyes closed, apparently exhausted; and Elena, who was evidently anxious that she should not be disturbed, made a sign to her to go downstairs, where she would join her.

"Why did you let Padre Antonio go without ever speaking to me, Elena?" said

Bianca reproachfully. "I was waiting to see him before he left."

"Who was to know that, child? You can go to see him any day, while your poor mother—ah! her days are numbered."

"Does Padre Antonio say that?" said the girl eagerly, with a start. "He cannot mean it. She cannot, she must not leave me."

Elena only replied by a mournful shake of her head. Bianca burst into a fit of weeping. Suddenly drying her eyes, she asked,

"She is not my mother, Elena. Why do you always call her so?"

"She is the only mother you know, poor child!" returned Elena compassionately,

for the thought of the girl's desolate future made her sad. "And, after all, mother or grandmother is much the same."

"But my real mother, Elena," persisted the girl, "why does no one ever tell me about her? She is buried at San Miniato, I know. Once I saw her grave. Father Antonio says he loves me for her sake. What is to become of me, I wonder?" she added, in a hard, almost an indifferent, tone.

"Ah, poverina, who can tell? Now, if you only had a vocation to the life of a religious, you would be always safe and happy inside the convent walls."

"Safe, perhaps, but not happy," said

Bianca bitterly. "You know Padre Antonio says that I have no vocation."

"We must pray for one. I will have masses said for that intention."

"Pray don't. I have no wish to pass my life in prison. In fact, I would not go, or stay, if I were sent there, Elena," she said defiantly; "so you may think of some other destiny for me. Cannot I go to my father? Where and what is he?"

"He is a foreigner and a heretic," said Elena, crossing herself. "Besides, I have heard lately——" and here she suddenly stopped short, evidently thinking it unwise to communicate her intelligence.

Bianca looked at her, as if asking for further information.

"Why don't you tell me what you have

heard, Elena? Have I not a right to know?"

"Then of course you will know in proper time. But I must not waste my time chatting here. It would be better for you, Bianca, if you had something to do instead of asking useless questions."

So saying, with some real and some pretended irritation, Elena hurried away, leaving Bianca to her own anxious, restless thoughts.

"Useless!" she repeated indignantly—"they are not useless questions to me. Whom can I ask that will tell me even who I am? I do not like to go to Padre Antonio only to ask him that, if even he would tell me. If I could only have seen him here!"

It was now past sunset, and the first

dangerous hour of twilight over. The street, which, for some time, had been empty, was now again filling. Groups of men stood about talking, and the women sat upon the doorsteps with little children playing around them. Bianca, too restless to remain at home, walked away from the house without any very definite purpose in her mind, when suddenly she heard a step, and a voice calling to her to stop.

"Carlo!" exclaimed the girl, as a tall, handsome youth, apparently about nineteen, came quickly up to her. "They told me you were at Leghorn. Why are you here?"

"Why should I not be here, Bianca?" he replied gaily. "I did not promise to remain at Leghorn for ever. I only re-

turned this evening, and came out to find you. Are you not glad to see me, Bianca?"

"Of course," she replied blushing. "Only I did not expect you, and you startled me. I was feeling so sorrowful, too! Oh, Carlo, all is so sad at home!" she added, as her eyes filled with tears, looking into Carlo Marani's eager, intelligent face, knowing that now at least she should meet with sympathy.

Carlo Marani was the only son of a painter of some eminence in Florence. He and Bianca had been playmates from their earliest childhood. They were little more than children now, and lately they had been parted. Bianca had missed his companionship, and raised him in her imagination at least to the rank of a favoured lover. It seemed a kind of mutual under-

standing that they should belong exclusively to each other.

"I am so grieved," he said tenderly. "I fear the Signora is worse."

"Much weaker. I scarcely see her now; and, Carlo, when she leaves me I shall be alone in the world."

"Never while I live, Bianca. I am young and shall earn money, and you know you are to be my wife," said the boy proudly, as if that alone would shelter her from all evil. "I am to have a studio in Florence some day, and shall soon be as rich as my father; I have no doubt of it."

Bianca shook her head. Her woman's instincts were more practical.

"All that maybe in years to come," she said, "but now——"

"Now we must wait," he replied hastily.

"I am not a child, Bianca, and am well able to take care of you."

"Perhaps I shall be a nun after all," she said half sadly, and half enjoying the pain she knew her words would give him. "I am going to the convent to talk to Sister Monica about it now."

"What can be the good of that? Come out with me now—come and walk about with me. The cool evening air will rest you. You look weary and heated, Bianca."

"I am weary, but going out will not do me any good; besides, I cannot walk with you, Carlo. You will come and see us before you go away?"

"Yes, certainly; but why not stay now?" he said, trying to detain her.

"I must go," she said, breaking away

from him and almost running down the street.

She arrived breathless at the convent, and gave so sudden a pull to the bell that the portress, alarmed, opened it immediately without any of the usual delay.

"*Ma che c'è?*" she asked, surprised to see only Bianca. "Is it Sister Monica you have come for? Here she is," she added, as a nun with a pale, thoughtful, and singularly expressive countenance came up the cloister.

"You have come for me, dear child. I could not come before; but now I will be with Maria immediately. Do not say it is too late."

"No, indeed," said Bianca, looking rather ashamed. "It is not that; I did not come for my mother. She is very feeble, but

not worse that I know of. I came for myself," she added blushing.

"For yourself, dear child! What fresh trouble can have fallen upon you?"

"None. It is nothing new, only I wanted to speak to you—to ask you something alone," she added shyly, in a low voice.

The kind nun smiled and led the way to a small parlour where Bianca instantly seated herself on the floor, laying her head on her friend's knee. This was an old habit of hers—a favourite position from childhood—when Sister Monica's kind eyes used to look sympathizingly down upon her as she softly stroked the luxuriant masses of hair that fell down upon the girl's shoulders. Now it was gathered up into a heavy coil round her head, but still Sister Monica placed her cool hand on

Bianca's hot brow as in old times, when she would pour out the small grievances of her young life. Not that they appeared small to her then, for the troubles of youth are so wholly engrossing at the time that they are more overwhelming than the real griefs of after life, when time, and often repeated sorrow have, in some degree, blunted the edge of acute feeling.

"Tell me who I am, who my father is, and what is to become of me?" said Bianca quickly.

"How can I, dear child?—and why to-day especially? Also, how can anyone prophesy as to the future of another, except, indeed, those that are happy enough to lead the life of a religious, and then we know——"

"Yes, you know what to expect—mo-

notony and dulness, without any change. That is not to be my life. I must live and see life, and I mean to marry," she said, with a slight shade of defiance in her tone.

"Then, if you have already made up your mind as to your destiny, Bianca, why are you troubled about it, or wish for advice and assistance from others?" asked the nun quietly.

"Because it must be uncertain till I know more; because no one's life is so lonely as mine," exclaimed the girl passionately, bursting into tears.

Sister Monica waited patiently till the violence of her fit of weeping had subsided, and then said kindly,

"I think I had better return with you

to-night, dear child. You are scarcely fit for watching in a sick-room."

Bianca felt the implied reproach, and said, penitently,

"I know I am impatient, dear Sister, and I am very sorry; but my life seems so different from that of others that I wonder why it is."

"Because God Almighty wills that it should be so. That is the only reason for all that happens to us in this world. It is His will; and to know this is the only way to bear our troubles. No doubt the uncertainty of your future weighs upon you; but it need not, for you have friends who will certainly protect you. Now it is getting so late that we must go."

"And you look so tired, and I have

dragged you out! I never meant it," said Bianca sorrowfully.

"I know that, dear child; but as we must all work, it little matters when or how," she replied, with her quiet, sad smile.

In less than an hour Bianca was sleeping soundly, while the moonlight streamed in upon the bed of the dying woman, and the pale, thoughtful watcher beside her.

CHAPTER III.

BUT little more suffering was in store for Maria Scevola. In less than a month Bianca had followed her grandmother to her grave, and was living alone with Elena in her desolate home. She was waiting for Padre Antonio to tell her what to do, as she would shortly have to give up the house. He said he was expecting a letter which would decide her future, and till that arrived nothing could be done. Meanwhile Carlo Marani had come again from Leghorn, and had been urgent in his entreaties to her to take up her abode, for

a time at least, in his father's house, and brought a message to that effect from his aunt, who had acted as mistress of the house since the death of Carlo's mother.

Maddalena Marani had always been kind and loving to the little motherless child, but now that she was absolutely homeless, and Carlo's affection for her was taking so decided a turn, she dreaded doing anything that her brother might disapprove. Though she had actually sent a message of invitation to Bianca, all the cordiality in it was infused by Carlo's manner of delivering it.

Bianca's quick instincts made her partly aware of this, and she at once and resolutely declined it, much to Elena's mortification. She considered it would be greatly to Bianca's advantage if she were known

to be living with people who were held in such high esteem as the family of the Marani; and if she and Carlo should ultimately come together, why, then all anxiety about the girl would be over, and, at all events, she should not be kept away any longer from her home, her children, and her business—that of plaiting fine straw—which had been sadly neglected of late. Still as Padre Antonio had from the first paid her well, both for nursing Maria Scevola, and then for remaining with her grandchild till her future should be definitely settled, she did not like to make any objection to it. But now she saw a way of escape, and eagerly told the old man of the invitation Bianca had received, and begged him to insist on her accepting it. But, to her vexation, she found that he

objected to the plan quite as much as Bianca, notwithstanding the advantage Elena assured him it would be to her, and the prestige it would give her in the eyes of her companions.

Days passed into weeks, and weeks lengthened into months, and though Padre Antonio wrote again and again for instructions as to what was to be done for Bianca, he could not obtain any reply, and as the house in which she was now living would soon revert to its owner, he was quite at a loss what to advise. Boarding at the convent in which Sister Monica lived, was the only solution he could think of, and to this Bianca had an insuperable objection.

One day that Elena began complaining of the loss it would be to her if she could

not soon rejoin her family, Bianca, who had become daily more unsettled, proposed that she should take her to England and find her father, and then, leaving her there, should return to Fiesole. Elena scouted the idea as impossible. She was totally unaccustomed to travel, and the notion of a journey to England, with a young girl as ignorant as herself of foreign ways and habits, seemed to her visionary, and not to be entertained. Bianca pleaded again and again, for to her young and ardent mind the difficulties melted away in the consideration of the object to be gained.

"I will get my father's address from Padre Antonio, and if he chooses to disown me," she said bitterly, "then I can return with you, and find some employ-

ment, so as not to be in your way any longer."

"It was not that. The Signora did not understand. Padre Antonio ought to feel that it was hard for a poor woman to live so entirely away from her family as she had done for the last year and more. Besides——"

"Besides what?" asked Bianca impatiently. "What is the difficulty now?"

"The padre would certainly turn a deaf ear to any such plan."

"But I would not tell him—he should know nothing about it. I have some money, left by my grandmother, which would be enough. What would it cost?"

"It would be impossible to take such a step without the padre's knowledge and

approval. It would be more than she dared to do. He would be so angry; and then we do not know the address."

"We know it is in England."

"In England! Bah! What is the use of that? It would be like hunting for a needle in a hayrick. We must have the exact address; and do you think Padre Antonio will give it to you without knowing what you want it for?"

"I will ask Padre Antonio for it," said Bianca, slowly and thoughtfully. "He is always saying that some one ought to know about my affairs, in case he should die. He cannot refuse my request. I will find out the address, and then we will talk about it again."

The idea which Bianca had broached quite occupied her mind, and she could

think and talk of nothing else till she at length accustomed Elena's mind to it, and it no longer seemed such an impossibility.

One day she set off to see Padre Antonio, intent upon this one object.

"You have nothing to tell me, padre, I fear?" she began, well knowing what his answer would be.

"No, my child, or you would have been told at once. So much delay keeps me very anxious on your account."

"Why should it? Some day I shall be told, and then perhaps I may have to go to England."

"I trust not, dear child, though I scarcely know what to wish. I should not like to lose sight of you—to think of you in a distant country, a nation of heretics, and where all would be so strange to

you. Besides, I promised your grandmother——"

"But, dear padre," interrupted Bianca quickly, "don't you think it would be better to tell me more than I now know —my father's name, and where he lives? Suppose a letter came, and you were ill or away."

"I often think of that myself; and your mother's papers, which are in my care, would be of importance to you. And yet you are very young to be entrusted with them," he added thoughtfully.

"Of course they are safest with you," said Bianca hastily. "It was my father's name and address that I wished to know —in fact, my own name. Now I am only called Bianca."

"Your father's name is Leslie, my

child," said the old man, after a considerable pause. "Here is a letter from him," he continued, taking one out of a bundle of letters carefully tied up. "This is his signature, 'Stuart Leslie, Carrisbridge.'"

"May I have that letter?—only that one?" asked Bianca, with changing colour, but trying to speak quietly in her longing to possess it. "Or shall I copy the address?"

"You may keep that. I have others—all your father ever wrote from England, in fact; also the certificate of your mother's marriage. I had better keep that at present; but if it is any comfort to you to keep that letter, you may do so."

"Thank you," said the girl, who seemed suddenly transformed from girlhood into womanhood. "Now tell me, dear padre,

why all is as it is. I mean, why I have never seen my father; why, as he is still living, no one ever mentions him. Was he not good to my mother?"

"It is a sad story, my child," said the old man, looking at her attentively. "It will only pain you to hear it."

"Pray tell me," said Bianca breathlessly.

"It is as well, perhaps, that you should hear it. You must know it some day; but I must go back many years—to your mother's girlhood. You remind me of her continually, dear child, and she was very dear to me. She was not altogether like you; she was brighter and gayer—like a sunbeam in the house. It was impossible not to spoil her, and yet she was so gentle and loving that it did not seem to harm

her. After your grandfather's death, your grandmother, who was left but poorly off, having a house in Florence that was much too large for herself, occasionally took in a lodger. One year it happened to be your father, so that he and Bianca continually met. He was so different from anyone she had ever seen that I believe she lost her heart to him at once. He was a grave, silent man, devoted to literature, and was fond of reading and speaking Italian to your mother. It was thus the intimacy began which ended in their marriage, and I often blame myself for not putting your grandmother on her guard soon enough. When I did it was too late."

"But why should you?—why did you object? Did not my father love my mother?"

"Yes, passionately; but he was a foreigner and a heretic, and evidently of higher rank than your grandmother. But as he at once proposed to marry Bianca—you are named after her—she did not object, though I could have wished to hear of his consulting his friends before he took so decided a step. But your mother loved him, and your grandmother was dazzled at the prospect of her daughter becoming the wife of a wealthy gentleman, and would not listen to my advice."

"Then you married them?" asked Bianca, intensely interested at the old man's words.

"Yes; and it all seems to me but yesterday, for life passes very quickly, child, when once we have turned the corner that leaves youth behind us. Not that I have much

to live for—nothing, in fact, but to see you settled and happy, for you have been a great care to me; and yet it is a beautiful world," he said, looking thoughtfully on the prospect that lay stretched before him, flooded in morning sunlight, for Bianca's visit was a very early one, and life is sweet even to the aged.

When Padre Antonio's conversation took a rambling turn, it was often difficult to bring him back to his starting point, and Bianca feared that he would lose the thread of his discourse.

"Where did the marriage take place?" said Bianca, hoping, by a direct question, to recall the padre's wandering thoughts. "Here—in Florence, I suppose; but in what church?"

"In the Duomo, my child. It was a

quiet marriage, yet we wished it to be a real festa, for your father gave abundant alms, both to feast the poor and for the church. He would have given me a handsome present, but I did not care to take it."

"Did my mother go at once to England?"

"No, she never saw England. They lived in a villa outside the city, and your father devoted himself to your mother. All was new to her—the life of books and pictures that he delighted in, and she soon grew to share his tastes. All she longed for was to go to his country, and see his friends, but your father always evaded the subject, and it was put off indefinitely. One day I found her in floods of tears, and I asked, in great surprise, what could

have happened, as she seemed to be so happy.

"'I am alone,' she said. 'Stuart is gone to his mother, and he could not take me.'

"'Why not? I suppose he will soon return,' I said, with a sad foreboding, I scarcely knew why.

"'He said it would hurt me to travel.' (This was before your birth, Bianca.) 'But, oh! Padre Antonio, it is far worse for me to be left alone to my sad thoughts, for I fear sometimes,' she said, in a low voice, as if she could not bear to say it, 'that his mother does not know of our marriage.'

"The same idea had often occurred to me, but I tried to comfort her, and distract her attention. I brought your grand-

mother to stay with her in her solitude, but all she cared for was your father's letters. She lived upon them, and fell into such an anxious, pining way that I wrote, at your grandmother's request, to beg your father to return soon, as she could not answer for the consequences, if he were not here at your birth. He set off at once on the receipt of my letter, but by the time he arrived you were already a week old. His presence seemed to give your mother new life, and as soon as she could be removed, he took lodgings at Leghorn, thinking that the sea air would restore her strength, while you were left with your grandmother and the peasant woman who had nursed you from the first. For a time your mother seemed to rally, but the improvement lasted only a short

time, and then she begged to be brought back to Florence, to see you while she could. She gradually sank, and only lived a few weeks after his return."

"And my father?" asked Bianca breathlessly.

"He never left her, and, after her death, seemed utterly heart-broken. He took no interest in any of his former pursuits, and only seemed to long to get away from Florence."

"Of course he would not care for me," said Bianca bitterly. "I could only be an encumbrance."

"He never seemed to look upon you in any light but that of a most precious legacy, and yet all that reminded him of his loss seemed to give him more pain than he could bear. He was most anxious to

arrange everything in the best way for you and your grandmother. In his letters he always inquired about 'his treasure,' and often spoke of coming over. We still continue to receive the money he allowed your grandmother, but his letters have entirely ceased. They became rarer and rarer, and a year ago I saw in an English newspaper that he had married again."

"A step-mother!" Bianca had never thought of such a contingency, and looked her dismay, as the hope of going to England, that had been such a joy to her, suddenly faded away, and she remained pale and silent, and lost in thought.

The old man looked at her sadly.

"You wished to hear all these details, child. It might have been better for you not to have known them."

"Are you sure my father is married again?" was her somewhat irrelevant reply.

"It was in the English newspaper, and therefore probably true. I know no more."

"Padre Antonio, I have settled what to do. If many months elapse without your hearing from my father, I shall go to him."

Bianca spoke with a quietness and decision very unusual to her, and as if contradiction would be useless. To her great surprise, the old man offered no opposition.

"It may be best, my child, but there is no need for hurry. Let us wait."

Bianca was quite willing to wait, and on her return told Elena that their jour-

ney to England was quite settled, and that Padre Antonio quite agreed that it was the best thing to do. It was only a question of time, but the journey would certainly be accomplished.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. LESLIE had been long purposing to go to London for a short time upon business, and occasionally spoke of this intention before his mother, who always listened to him in solemn silence, with sundry glances at Maud, as if she made an insurmountable difficulty. It never seemed to occur to Maud herself that she could remain at Carrisbridge without her husband, though, when she once spoke in the sense of accompanying him, he negatived it at once, saying that his business would not take him very long,

and that to leave her alone all day, either in an hotel or lodgings in London, was out of the question. Maud pouted and looked discontented, and did not accede as readily as he expected to his proposal of taking her to Hurst Manor, and leaving her there to pass the time of his absence with her parents.

"I can fetch you as I return, Maud, and then perhaps we may be able to persuade your mother to return with us, and pay her promised visit here."

He spoke kindly, but it was clear to Maud's quick perception that he disliked the idea, and only proposed it for her sake.

"I should not think of such a thing," she said coldly. "I do not wish them to come here *now*," and her glance at Mrs. Leslie was anything but conciliatory.

"Why?" said Stuart indifferently. "I thought that, as your mother had never seen this place, you might like her to come, and this seemed a good opportunity. What will you do while I am away?"

"If I am not allowed to go with you, I shall remain here."

"As you please; but I think you will be lonely, and find that it is a mistake."

Maud was silent. Her inclination was to go to Hurst Manor, but something in the tone of her husband's voice had nettled her, and she would not give up her resolution.

"If I were to be alone, I should not mind it so much; it would be far better than being with those dreadful old women," was her unspoken thought; and Mrs. Leslie dreaded the time of her son's

absence quite as much as Maud, feeling as if she were to be left in charge of some wild animal, with which she could not possibly cope. She expressed some of this feeling to her son, adding—"It will be quite out of my power to control her, Stuart; you must understand that."

"There need be no question of control, mother," he replied, with some irritation. "I should like Maud to do exactly what she pleases. I wish you could make her more of a companion; it would be better for you both."

"The companionship of an old woman would not be much to her taste. I never have seen the slightest desire of the kind on her part. But as you do not wish me to take any charge of her, there is nothing more to be said."

Two days after Mr. Leslie left Carrisbridge. He set off early, and Maud stood at the door, disconsolately watching the carriage drive up which was to take him to the station.

"I wish I had thought of going with you to the railroad, Stuart. It would have been something to do," she said sadly.

"There is no time to lose now; besides, you would be frozen waiting on that platform. I must be off. God bless you, darling!" he said, kissing her fondly, feeling pleased at her wish to be with him to the last.

Another minute and he was gone; but Maud still lingered in the hall, till recalled to recollection by Miss Campbell's sharp voice:

"Pray come to the fire, young Mrs. Leslie. It is too cold for you here."

"Yes, Maud. Won't you come into my room?" said her mother-in-law. "That is warm; and if you like to bring your work, Abigail shall read aloud to us."

Maud looked rather doubtful, but only said—

"Read! What sort of book?"

"Oh, a very interesting work that came from the library yesterday—some travels in Norway and Lapland."

Maud's face did not express much pleasure at the suggestion, but she followed her mother-in-law into her room, and sat down in a weary, disconsolate manner.

"Had you not better get some work, my dear?" suggested Mrs. Leslie.

"I don't care, thank you," said Maud listlessly.

Miss Campbell then proceeded to read aloud in a monotonous voice, to which Maud could pay but little attention. Though she heard the words, they conveyed no meaning to her mind, and when Mrs. Leslie occasionally exclaimed, "How extraordinary!" "That is very interesting!" Maud had not the slightest idea to what she alluded. Happily, no one questioned her on the subject, and in due time the luncheon-bell summoned them away.

"I shall want the carriage," said Mrs. Leslie, to a servant, as soon as luncheon was over. "I suppose, Maud, you will drive to-day?"

"Why? Where to? I had ordered Daisy. I meant to ride."

"To ride alone? Surely not!"

"Not alone, certainly. Felton would go with me, as Stuart is away. But perhaps you want him. If you do——"

Mrs. Leslie shook her head.

"I do not want him," she answered coldly. "But pray did you mention this intention of riding to Stuart?"

"Not especially to-day. But he knew that I should ride in his absence. He often spoke of it."

"Then I have no more to say;" and Mrs. Leslie clasped her hands, and looked up appealingly to heaven. "I told Stuart before he left that I could take no responsibility."

"Why should you?" returned Maud, nettled at being treated so like a child. "Stuart wished me to do exactly what I

liked, so I suppose I had better get ready;" and soon after Mrs. Leslie watched her riding past the windows.

Felton was an old servant, to whose care Stuart had always been entrusted as a child, and the whole household considered that where Felton was no harm could possibly arise.

As soon as Maud was out of sight she turned on to a common, and urged Daisy to a pace that rather disconcerted the old groom. But it relieved Maud from her momentary irritation, and she rode rapidly on, wondering if it would *do* to call at Camelford, and, perhaps, see Mrs. Ainslie, who had made so deep an impression upon her.

While she was debating, Lady Johnston's carriage drove by, but, as soon as Maud

was recognised, it was stopped, and she was warmly greeted.

"We were coming to see you, Mrs. Leslie, thinking that, as Mr. Leslie was away, a visit might be acceptable."

"How good of you and Mrs. Ainslie too. I am sorry to be out, but I hope you will go on. I will turn back, and, by riding home the short way, I shall be there first and ready to receive you."

"Oh, no! we cannot take you back and spoil your ride. Cannot you come to us to-morrow to luncheon, and I can take you home, if you do not ride."

"Thank you. I will certainly come, but I do not know if Mrs. Leslie will want the carriage. Daisy and I must depend on her will," said Maud, with a satirical smile.

Mrs. Ainslie looked up, and Maud, catching her eye, blushed deeply.

"Of course I can always ride," she said apologetically.

"Do as you like," said Lady Johnston kindly, "only come. I wish I could have persuaded you to spend these days with us, but till yesterday I thought you were going with your husband."

Maud wondered how that intelligence had reached her, and, hastily taking leave, cantered home in a much brighter mood.

Mrs. Leslie willingly put the carriage at her disposal the next day, but it was a real disappointment to find Mrs. Ainslie gone. She had left a note for Maud, saying how sorry she was to miss her, and how glad she should be to hear from her, enclosing her address.

"So Mrs. Ainslie lives at Durham," said Maud, after a second and careful perusal of the note.

"Yes; in a quaint old house not far from the cathedral—picturesque enough, but, I should think, *triste* to the last degree."

"She asks me to write to her," said Maud, "but what can I tell her from Carrisbridge? Nothing ever happens there. But it is very good of her to write to me. She said I reminded her of some one else."

"Yes, her only daughter. She lived only for this girl, who caught Roman fever and died in a few days."

"How sad!" replied Maud, adding, after a few minutes, "It is very odd, but I feel as if I had seen her before."

"It is scarcely likely; she has lived for years in such strict retirement. She is a very charming person. But now, come to luncheon. I suppose I must drive you back early to Carrisbridge, or Mrs. Leslie will say that I keep you too long."

"I don't suppose she will give me a thought," said Maud indifferently. "But perhaps I had better go home early."

Lady Johnston was much taken with Maud's youth and beauty, and endeavoured to make the drive as pleasant to her as possible. Mrs. Leslie was not popular in the neighbourhood, and Maud was an object of compassion to many, "alone in that grim house with two stiff old women, *pour tout potage*," for no one knew how much or how little of his time Stuart gave up to his young wife.

"I wish, oh! how I wish!" exclaimed Maud, as she took leave of Lady Johnston at the door.

"What?" inquired her companion. "Is it a wish that can be gratified?"

"Oh! no," said Maud, blushing. "It was a foolish wish. It was that you lived here."

"Well, in some ways perhaps I do. At all events, I should like to have you for a daughter-in-law," she replied, kissing her affectionately.

CHAPTER V.

A FEW days later Maud received a note from Stuart, saying that he had been detained longer than he expected, but that he should certainly return the end of the week. She had felt the days of his absence especially long and monotonous, and rejoiced accordingly. She ran upstairs with a bright smile, to impart her information to Mrs. Leslie, who received it in solemn silence, and appeared to think herself in some way slighted at hearing it first from her.

In the meantime Father Antonio and

Bianca had devoted much time in discussing her intention of going to England to seek her father, and, though the enterprise seemed easy enough to Bianca's young and ardent spirit, to the old priest, who was more conversant with the world, it seemed full of difficulties. He was also very doubtful as to the success of her mission; but to all this the girl turned a deaf ear, and it seemed as if he could only help her by furthering the scheme upon which she had set her heart.

Elena had always insisted upon accompanying her, and she was quite a sufficient protector; but the fact that neither she nor Bianca knew English created a real difficulty. Father Antonio intended to write a very urgent letter to Mr. Leslie, but he felt that something more was need-

ed to prove their identity, and make their story good. It suddenly occurred to him that his only sister had married an Englishman—a musical professor of the name of Fuller—and to this man he resolved to appeal for assistance. Mr. Fuller lived in London, and Father Antonio resolved to send Bianca there in the first instance, and beg of him to take her to Carrisbridge himself, and, as he meant to tell him her whole story, he could act as interpreter. He also promised to defray any expenses he might incur, feeling that, in such a case, he could depend upon Mr. Leslie to fulfil any claim that restored to him his long-lost child. This idea was a great relief to him, and he put Bianca on board the steamer from Leghorn with a less heavy heart than he expected.

Bianca herself was full of hope and energy, but she was quite unaccustomed to any sort of illness, and, though they had a tolerably good passage, she was so prostrated by sea-sickness as to make it very doubtful to Elena, when they landed at Dover, if it was prudent to proceed at once to London. But a strange country and a strange language perplexed her so much that she was afraid to delay, and, quite late in the evening, the weary travellers drove up to Mr. Fuller's door.

It was a great relief to hear her native language—greater still to receive Mrs. Fuller's cordial greeting. They lived in a small house in a narrow street, and the outside world was as black and foggy as only London can look on a Winter night. Mrs. Fuller could not accompany them the next day,

so Bianca had a day's rest in which to look out into the dingy street, and day-dream on the prospect before her, which, now it was so near its accomplishment, looked many degrees less hopeful than it did in her sunny Italian home.

The next day they started early for the north, but did not arrive at the small station which was their destination till late in the evening. This was at some distance from Carrisbridge, but the village was nearer, where there was a small inn, at which they determined to sleep, so that they might see Mr. Leslie early the next morning, Mr. Fuller thinking that the sight of Bianca would be a better letter of recommendation than any he could bring.

The day was clear and bright, and the hopes of the little party rose as they

crossed the common, and soon found themselves in the park, in which there was a long avenue, which led to the house.

As they approached, they saw a young lady walking towards them, for Maud had taken advantage of the sunshine to go out early with the large dog that generally accompanied her. As she drew near, she looked inquiringly at the trio, the old woman and picturesque girl looking so unlike any of the people she was accustomed to meet in her rambles. They mutually stopped when they met, without exactly knowing why, and the man, who looked to Maud like a respectable tradesman, took off his hat.

"Do you want to see anyone?" asked Maud, with some hesitation, expecting

him to produce an application for money in some shape or form.

"My companions have business—important business," he added, with considerable emphasis, "with Mr. Leslie. He lives here, I believe?"

"Yes, but he is not at home. He is away, and will not be back for some days. I will tell him, or perhaps I may be able to help you."

"La Signora Leslie," said Bianca, in a low voice; but a glance from Elena enforced silence.

Maud, however, had heard and noted the eager expression of her face.

"Are you Italian also?" she asked, turning to Bianca, much struck with the girl's beauty.

Mr. Fuller answered for her.

"They are both Italians, Madame, and have no knowledge of English. I came with them expressly to act as interpreter, in case we should find Mr. Leslie absent. *He*, doubtless, is a perfect Italian scholar."

"I believe he knows Italian," said Maud drily. These people were becoming more and more puzzling to her. "Do they know my husband, and what do they want—who are they?"

Mr. Fuller was silent, but at length said they would wait for Mr. Leslie's return.

"Very likely," replied Maud, her heart beating fast as she became more and more aware of some mystery connected with this visit. "But I want to know who they are."

"Ma è la sua figlia," said Elena, feeling very impatient at all this delay, of which she understood nothing.

"Figlia!" repeated Maud, her eyes dilating, and turning deadly pale. A sudden thought struck her as she saw Bianca standing gazing at her with clasped hands.

"Si, si, la sua figlia," repeated Elena, looking defiant, as if expecting some contradiction from Maud.

Maud looked at the Englishman, hoping to hear him give some explanation, but he remained silent, and a glance at Bianca's large dark eyes suddenly turned her doubt into certainty, convincing her that the thought which had so suddenly flashed across her mind was no illusion.

"I must know more," she said haughtily. "You had better come with me into the house."

Her manner was too imperious to be resisted, and they followed her up the steps into the old hall. Maud opened the door of a small library, and, making a sign to them to sit down, stood waiting for them to tell her more.

"Am I to give you this?" said Mr. Fuller, producing Father Antonio's letter. "I believe it explains more than I know myself, though I have been told all the facts of the case."

Maud hesitated. The letter was addressed to her husband, and she felt that, as he supposed her to be ignorant of the whole subject, he would not be pleased at

her opening it, especially remembering the objection the old servant had once made to her touching Stuart's letters.

"Shall I tell you all I do know?" he asked, as Maud still held the unopened letter in her hand.

"Perhaps it would be better, and I can then leave this till Mr. Leslie returns."

With much gesticulation, and in a somewhat pompous manner, Mr. Fuller began his narrative.

He said that "when Mr. Leslie was travelling in Italy, as quite a young man, he lodged in a house in Leghorn, in which there was a most beautiful girl, daughter of the woman who kept the house. He went to other places, but continually came back. He could not tear himself from

Bianca Matuni, with whom, as was only probable in a young man like Mr. Leslie, he fell desperately in love, and being" (as Mr. Fuller expressed it) "a high-minded gentleman, eventually married her. They took a small house in Florence, and lived there for several months. He never took her to England, as he thought his family would disapprove of the marriage. He then left her, saying that business required his presence in England. She implored him not to do so, but he did, and he returned only to see her die.

"He was absent about three or four months, and was almost distracted when he came back and found her hopelessly ill. Her mother took entire charge of the child, and begged it might be left

with her, to which he readily consented, for how could he undertake the care of a helpless infant, whose existence and claim upon him were unknown to his relations?

"Padre Antonio, who was with her mother to the last, took great interest in the child, and to him Bianca went in every trouble, and a great trouble it was when she lost her good grandmother. She was determined, poor orphan as she was, to find her father, and Padre Antonio gave her all the assistance in his power, and the letter which I have brought he begged my wife, who is his sister, to deliver to Mr. Leslie. They came direct to my house in London, and in his letter to my wife Padre Antonio begged us to take care of Bianca, and to bring her here myself,

which I have done. Her father's absence is unfortunate—most unfortunate."

He paused, thinking Maud would suggest some mode of action. But she felt stunned and bewildered by all she had heard, and perhaps, after all, this strange story might *not* be true.

Elena, who had understood but little of his harangue, watched Maud's countenance anxiously.

"Of course I cannot act in any way till Mr. Leslie returns and vouches for the truth of this story, which is all strange to me," she said coldly. "Indeed I scarcely know what you want or expect."

"Bianca hopes, indeed expects, her father to acknowledge her," replied Mr. Fuller, somewhat indignantly. "If he does not choose to receive her into his

house, he will surely provide her with a maintenance and a home!"

Maud felt it impossible to realize what was before her. This girl, a foreigner, and, probably, a Catholic, to be an inmate of her home, and to have as much right in that home as she had! Did his mother know of this? Should she ask her, or would it be better to wait? If her husband had trusted her, if she had only known of the existence of this child, or of his first wife, she would have taken her to her heart; but this slight and mistrust, this want of confidence, wounded her deeply, and she could not forgive it.

"Do you know that Mrs. Leslie, my husband's mother, is alive, and lives here?" inquired Maud at last.

Mr. Fuller turned to Elena and asked

her, who replied that she had heard so long ago, but that now——

"Well, she is; and much depends upon her. Do you wish to see her?"

Ah, no. Why should they? La Signora would doubtless do all that was right. They were quite content to depend upon her.

"But I think it would be as well," persisted Maud. "She may know more than I do. I should like to ask her;" and, ringing the bell, she despatched a servant with a message to Mrs. Leslie to beg that she would come and speak to some one who had come to see Mr. Leslie on business.

It had flashed across Maud's mind that she might perhaps have been duped by both mother and son.

Mrs. Leslie came immediately, looking

very much surprised at the group before her.

"Who are these people?" she said, in a low voice to Maud.

"I do not know. I thought perhaps you might. Stuart never told me of any previous marriage; but you probably know all about it," she said bitterly.

"Previous marriage! And to whom?" she asked, looking at the old woman and the young girl in utter amazement.

"Then you do *not* know!" exclaimed Maud, with a sudden feeling of relief. "They say that Stuart married an Italian long ago, and this"—turning to Bianca—"is his daughter."

"Absurd! preposterous! You could not believe it? Why did you let these people enter the house? Of course it is

an imposture. My son—Stuart—married to a foreigner years ago, and without my knowledge! Impossible!"

"I must assure you, madam, that nothing was ever less of an imposture," said Mr. Fuller. "The proofs are ready for any one who requires them. I am sorry Mr. Leslie is away. But we shall return to London, and shall expect to hear from him as soon as he returns;" and, so saying, he gave a printed card into Mrs. Leslie's hand.

Mrs. Leslie was too angry at the man's audacity to make any reply. She felt provoked, too, with Maud for sending for her, and for listening for a single moment to what she felt sure was false. Why had not Maud turned these impostors out of the house?

"Really, Maud, you should not allow people of this sort to come into the house," she said, in a low voice. "I will ring for Wilkins to send them away."

Though she spoke in a low voice, Mr. Fuller, who was getting really angry, caught the last words, and hastily rose.

"Madam, there is no necessity for sending us away. We are only too glad to leave a house in which we have been received in a manner we so little expected. We shall see Mr. Leslie, wherever he is, as soon as possible—of *that* I have no doubt—and you will then know that all we have asserted is as true as that there is a God in heaven who will see this orphan child righted. She will not leave England till she has seen her father; and

as to her future, it is for him to decide. Come away, Bianca—come away at once from those who scorn and mistrust you."

Bianca lingered and looked back at Maud, whose bright face and manner had greatly attracted the impulsive Italian girl. She had not understood a word of the conversation, but was loth to leave her without some demonstration, and, before Maud was aware, took her hand and pressed it to her lips. It was the work of a moment, and no one noticed it; but to Maud it gave a sudden pang as the conviction that there was a reasonable foundation for the story gained upon her.

She had noticed from the first the inde-

scribable resemblance so often to be traced in those that are nearly related, and felt as if she had in some way acted harshly towards her. Turning to Mr. Fuller, she said, quietly and sadly,

"If you will leave me your name and address, I will communicate with Mr. Leslie as soon as I can."

Her mother-in-law was full of anger, and could not conceal it, but Maud was very calm and still, feeling as if all life had changed to her. She was only conscious of a wish to be alone, to come to some decision as to the future—for, strangely enough, Maud had no sympathy with her mother-in-law. She had felt from the first that there was truth in this strange story, in all the man had said, and in Bianca's clear dark eyes.

"Stuart will only care for her," was her unspoken thought. "I cannot be a stranger in my home."

For the first time, her tears flowed rapidly, and the old house, with its stiffness and gloom, suddenly became precious in her eyes, for her love for her husband was undiminished, though mingled with bitterness. She hoped that Stuart would repudiate all these people had said—if not, she could not stay. But where could she go? Not to Hurst Manor; the mortification *that* would entail was greater than she could bear. She could not face either her father's compassion or her mother's indignation. What could she do? Suddenly she remembered Mrs. Ainslie's words and invitation to come to her if she could be useful. That would be more possible, but

she must wait for Stuart's return. In two days he would probably be at home, and then——

CHAPTER VI.

THOSE two days seemed interminable, but they passed as all days do, whether longed for or dreaded, and late one cold afternoon she heard Stuart's voice in the hall, and his step on the stairs, and her heart grew faint as she thought of all that depended on the next few days. She ran down to meet him; he looked just the same as ever; that story must be false. How could she think otherwise, as she looked into his face as it smiled upon her?

"How are you, my darling? Did you

think that I was never coming back?" he said, kissing her fondly. "Are you well?" he inquired, noticing her *gênée* manner and anxious face.

"I am quite well," said Maud, with some hesitation; "but some people have been to see you, Stuart."

"Who were they? Did you see them, as I was away?"

"Your mother saw them," answered Maud, evading a direct answer.

"I am going to see my mother," he said indifferently. "I daresay she will tell me what they wanted. It was probably nothing of any consequence."

Maud was silent, but the expression of her face as she looked up awakened some curiosity in his mind as to his visitors.

"I will go and see my mother at once.

Wait for me, Maud; I shall not be five minutes."

Maud was quite ready to wait, hoping that Mrs. Leslie would be satisfied with the explanation she was so anxious to hear. But the five minutes became half an hour, and then she determined that she would not wait any longer, feeling provoked that he should give so much time to his mother, forgetting that she was waiting.

"I shall go and dress now, it is so late," she said to herself. "I wonder what makes them so long, and whether there is really any truth in that story? How I wish I had asked him myself," was the thought that took possession of her mind. She only saw her husband for a moment, and as her maid was in the room she could not ask him questions.

Greatly discomfited, she went downstairs, and, to her surprise, found Mrs. Leslie there before her.

"Oh! Stuart is come, and you have seen him," she said eagerly.

"Yes; he said you did not look well."

This proof of interest made no impression upon Maud. Her mind was full of one idea—what had Stuart said to his mother?

"Well, and what did he say?" asked Maud breathlessly.

"He told me how the lawyers detained him in London, and I am sorry to say that he must go back there."

"When? Why? What for?"

"Business, of course."

"Yes; but what business?" asked Maud,

with a sudden panic. "What did he say about that strange story?"

"Have not you seen him, Maud?"

"Yes, but I did not ask him; I thought——"

"He is sure to tell you himself all he wishes you to know," said Mrs. Leslie drily.

"Very likely; but what did he tell you?" asked Maud angrily. "Is that story true or false? Why am I to be kept in the dark?"

"I don't know that you are. But here is Stuart," she replied nervously.

Dinner was announced, and Maud was therefore obliged to do what was most repugnant to her nature, and wait.

After dinner, Stuart went into his study, having, as he said, many arrears in his

correspondence to make up. He did not return, and Maud opened the study door as she went upstairs.

"I have not seen you at all, Stuart," she said reproachfully.

"My darling, I have had so much to do, and to-morrow——"

"Yes, your mother says you are going back to London to-morrow. What for?"

She spoke in a cold, hard tone.

"I am more sorry than you can be, Maud," he said sadly, "but it will only be for twenty-four hours."

"Have you heard about the people that came here?"

"No. My mother said they brought a letter for me, but as they did not leave it, I do not know much about it."

This was partly true, for Stuart thought

it possible that some imposture was practised by persons who had known the facts of the case, and had no intention of acknowledging to Maud as much as he had to his mother, for when she saw him she had told him the story with great indignation, and called upon him to deny it.

"I cannot altogether," replied Stuart sadly, "but what you have heard happened long ago, and you have probably heard some garbled statement."

"These people spoke of a previous marriage. Surely that is an invention to further some plan of their own."

Stuart was silent.

"Why do you not speak, my son?" she continued, in great agitation. "Tell me these words are false—I insist upon know-

ing. If true, why was I never told?"

"Mother, you must listen to me patiently. All that you refer to happened long ago—when I went abroad—little more than a boy, and stayed away three years. It is true that during that time I married an Italian girl, very young and very beautiful. I did not tell you because I hoped in time to reconcile you to the fact of my marrying a foreigner, and afterwards it was useless. We lived for a year at Florence, and after our child was born Bianca fell into bad health. Unfortunately I left her to come to England, then she left me, mother," he repeated, in a faltering voice, and his eyes filling with tears. "How then could I tell you?"

"Then that girl really was your daugh-

ter?" exclaimed Mrs. Leslie, almost breathless with amazement.

"That is more than I can say at present, but if all they assert is true, it must be so. It is so long since I heard anything of her that I cannot say anything till I know more. I must go to London and get that letter. You say that they left their address?"

"They returned to London. Surely you will not go away again. Cannot you write, or put the matter in the hands of your lawyer? This will be a great shock to Maud."

"I fear so. Poor Maud! I hoped she would never know it; but now——"

"You are not going to fetch this girl—you never would dream of bringing her

here? It would be impossible!" exclaimed his mother.

"I have had no time to think about it. I do not see what can be done—what it is my duty to do. Mother, you will help me. I cannot desert my child, though I have never seen her since she was an infant. I can know nothing till I have seen these people. I must not delay it. She has probably friends in Italy—she lived with her grandmother."

Mrs. Leslie was in a very divided state of mind. Grieved at having her worst fears realised, and yet feeling gratified at Stuart's trust in her, and at his appeal to her. This kept her from reproaching him. She was glad that he came to her in this trouble, and not to his young wife. This made up for so much that would otherwise

have been unbearable, and she was content to listen to him in silence.

"I do not know what to advise," she said, "but I agree with you in thinking it useless to say anything at present to Maud. When you return from London, and have heard more, you will be able to come to some decision. It will be best to tell her then."

Mrs. Leslie then went downstairs, and no further conversation passed that evening beyond the few words Stuart Leslie had said to Maud in the study, and from those she had learned nothing. She passed a sleepless night, longing to question her husband upon all she had heard, and yet shrinking both from awakening his displeasure and having her fears confirmed.

"I shall be back early to-morrow or late to-night," said Stuart, as he hastily took leave of her, for he went before she was dressed; and as she stood at her window and saw the carriage drive away, she felt, now Stuart was gone, how foolish she had been in not insisting upon knowing the truth.

"As it is, I feel sure he has told his mother. She always comes between us. How I wish——" But here it suddenly struck her that her thoughts were, to say the least, uncharitable, and, rather ashamed, she went downstairs in better dispositions than usual towards her mother-in-law.

Stuart Leslie's business took him longer than the twenty-four hours he anticipated, for when he arrived at Mr. Fuller's house, no one was at home except his wife, and

she evidently knew but little of her husband's movements, or when to expect him back. She said he had taken his visitors to find a lodging out of London—Blackheath, she believed, as they were obliged to stay longer in England than they expected, and found London too expensive. Should she give them any message when they returned?

Leslie hesitated. He could decide nothing till he had seen them; then, suddenly recollecting the letter, he asked if there was one for him.

"There is a letter on the shelf," said Mrs. Fuller, in her broken English; "but I know not for whom it is."

"Let me see," he said, eagerly taking the letter—"yes, it is for me. Will you let me read it here?"

"Yes, if it is yours. But how can I tell?" she said, somewhat dismayed at Leslie's summary proceedings.

He took out a card.

"It is my name, you see. I will leave it with you when I have read the letter, to convince your husband that it is all right."

He took the letter to the window, and, standing up with his back to Mrs. Fuller, eagerly read it. Every word seemed to burn itself upon his heart. He well remembered Padre Antonio, and his simple, truthful statement left no room for doubt.

His mind travelled back to the past, and he lived over again the sad story of his early youth, and, burying his face in his hands, gave himself up to sad memories

and bitter thoughts, till recalled to himself by Mrs. Fuller's sudden exclamation—

"Now they come. The Signor will have no further trouble;" and he saw an elderly woman and a young girl enter the room. One glance at Bianca was enough to convince him of the truth of their story.

"You are Bianca," he said, taking the girl's hand, and drawing her towards him. "Come to me, my child. You are the living image of your mother."

"And you—you are my father?" she said in Italian, kneeling at his feet. "Ah, how I rejoice!"

Bianca's face, her words, the old familiar language—all touched him to the heart, and he was quite unable to speak. But, quickly mastering his emotion as Mr.

Fuller came up, he rose to meet him, and, pointing to the letter and his card, said—

"I have to thank you for bringing me this. I have read it."

"The Signor knows that all we say is true," said Elena. "Yet at your palace we were not believed. This gentleman knows how we were treated, but now you will take Bianca to your heart and home. Ah, our troubles are all over!" and she embraced Bianca rapturously.

But her father's grave face and manner awed the warm-hearted child, and she looked wistfully from one to the other, evidently not knowing what to expect, or if any demonstration on her part would not lead to a repulse.

"As you have read Father Antonio's letter," said Mr. Fuller at length, after a

somewhat awkward silence, "I need not explain the cause of their coming to England. It was a real disappointment to find you away from home, and ourselves mistrusted as we were by the ladies of the house—especially by the elder of the two. We knew not what to do, but, feeling for that poor child, in her forlorn and desolate position, I advised them to wait as long as they could, and we have just returned from engaging a lodging which we thought would suit them, but I suppose that now——"

"I will let you know," was Mr. Leslie's hasty rejoinder. "You have friends in Italy, my child?"

"Ah! yes; but no one like my grandmother!" And here the poor child's tears flowed afresh; for her meeting with her

father had been so unlike what she had anticipated. He looked so cold and stern to her warm and southern nature.

Stuart was greatly perplexed. He wished to acknowledge his child, and take her back with him to Carrisbridge, but how could he tell what Maud's reception of her might be? He felt that he must be alone, and, saying that he would return early the next day, he walked up and down the cold, foggy streets, till he was both weary and exhausted, without coming to any decision. He then regretted not having told Maud as much as he had told his mother. He would trust to Bianca's youth and beauty, and warm nature, to win his young wife's heart. He would beg her to love his child, but would say nothing to her till he brought her himself. He must

take Elena also, as Bianca's companion and attendant, otherwise she would be so lost and lonely. Every plan seemed full of difficulty, but he could not come to any other decision, and he resolved to telegraph to his mother as soon as possible.

CHAPTER VII.

THE wording of this telegram was a considerable difficulty, but at last it resolved itself into very few words:

"*Expect us to-morrow. Send to meet the three o'clock train. Prepare two bed-rooms.*"

Nothing could exceed Mrs. Leslie's dismay on the receipt of this telegram. What could she do? Did Stuart mean her to break it to Maud? How much did she know of the story of his life? Happily Maud was out when the message came, and her

mother-in-law clung to the hope that she would know nothing of it. But in this she was mistaken, for Maud had seen the servants preparing the rooms, and, in great surprise, inquired who was expected.

No one knew. Mr. Leslie was coming the next day, and had ordered the rooms to be ready.

She hastily entered the room where Mrs. Leslie was sitting.

"Who is coming? Have you heard from Stuart?" she asked.

"Yes; Stuart has sent a telegram to say he is coming."

"Has he? And who is coming with him? For whom are those rooms being prepared? Who are they?"

"He said nothing beyond ordering them

to be got ready. You will know when he comes to-morrow."

Maud left the room, too proud to ask any more questions, but felt, no doubt, that Stuart had recognised the claim of his daughter, and would bring her back with him. She felt doubly aggrieved, first at the concealment which had been practised throughout, and secondly, at the idea of her husband's taking such a step without even informing her of his intention. Stuart Leslie's entire want of confidence in his wife was a grave mistake.

"I cannot see that girl," she said aloud. "Stuart ought not to expect it. I must go away before she comes. If he had spoken to me; if he had trusted me and treated me as his wife ought to be treated; if he had asked me to love her for his sake,

I would have done it willingly, gladly. But now—what can I do?" and sitting down and hiding her face in the cushions of the sofa, she shed many and bitter tears.

But this did not last long. She felt that she had to think and to act. What could she do? She never for a moment entertained the idea of going to Hurst Manor—that was quite out of the question. Mrs. Ainslie was the only person she could think of.

"I will go at once before this girl comes," she thought; and, strung up to an unusual pitch of excitement, rang the bell and ordered her horse to be got ready. She resolved to ride to Camelford to see Lady Johnston, and to find out exactly where Mrs. Ainslie lived, and how

to go there, for Maud was a very inexperienced traveller, and Bradshaw a complete mystery to her. She could not bring herself to ask Mrs. Leslie any further questions, and went at once to prepare for her ride.

"Bring me a glass of wine and a biscuit, Martin," she said to her maid. "I shall not go down to luncheon, and very probably shall go away for a few days to-morrow, so you must be ready."

"What shall I put up, ma'am," answered the maid, looking, as she felt, extremely surprised. "Will it be a dress party?"

"It is no party at all. If I go it will be for a few days to a friend—to a lady who is probably quite alone. I may perhaps stay there a week or so."

Martin much wished to extract some

more information, but Maud cut her short and escaped as soon as possible from what she considered "tiresome nonsense." She felt the world was full of vexations for her, and longed for a gallop on Daisy to get rid of some of them. But on her arrival at Camelford she was again disappointed, for both Lady Johnston and Sir Henry were out. While she was considering whether she should leave a message or go in and write a note, Lord St. Leger came up to the door. He had seen her from a distance and lost no time in joining her.

"I am so disappointed to find Lady Johnston out, Lord St. Leger," and he saw by her face that this was true, and not merely a civil speech.

"Can I give her any message or help

you in any way?" he asked, surprised at Maud's anxious face.

"No, thank you—yes; perhaps you can tell me Mrs. Ainslie's exact direction."

"I think so. —— House, Durham, is sure to find her. Lady Johnston will be in soon. Would you like to leave your letter for her to direct?"

"It is not a letter. I want to know how to get there."

"To get there?" he repeated. "Most of the London trains stop at Durham, so there is no difficulty."

"Yes, there is to me," said Maud impatiently, "for I know nothing about railroads and trains."

"Shall I look at Bradshaw for you? I saw one on the table. If you could

come in for a minute I could write it down."

"Very well," said Maud; "only I cannot wait."

She followed him into the house, and he took out his card and hastily turned over its complicated pages.

"Here it is," and he read over the time-table which was very incomprehensible to Maud. "If you leave this station at ten, you will get there early in the afternoon. That seems the best train. All the others are too early or too late. But who is going with you? Is Leslie come back?"

"No; I am going alone. I must."

"Dear Mrs. Leslie, why must you? I am sure Leslie would not like you to travel alone. If you are obliged to go, let me go with you. I am going to Conyers to-

morrow, and stopping at Durham will make little or no difference to me. Only tell me when you go, and I will meet you at the station."

Maud demurred, though she was fully aware that his companionship would be both a help and a protection to her. She felt very undecided, but after some more conversation she yielded, and, as he put her on her horse, said,

"Very well, I shall be at the station at ten o'clock."

Lord St. Leger watched her ride away in considerable wonder.

"Something is wrong," he thought. "I wonder if I have done wisely in offering to go with her, but she seems so young and helpless, poor child!"

Maud congratulated herself on her fore-

thought in riding to Camelford. "Now I shall have no trouble," and any slight misgiving she felt as to her arrangements she dismissed at once. "What did it matter to anyone where she went, and besides, who would know?"

She lost no time in preparing for her sudden journey. She wished to say nothing about it, but that was impossible as she must ask her mother-in-law for the carriage.

"Can I have the carriage early to-morrow morning?" she asked Mrs. Leslie that evening.

"Of course, if you like. To meet Stuart, I suppose; but he does not come till three."

"No, I want it very early. I am going to pay a visit."

Mrs. Leslie looked surprised, and Maud, wishing for no further comments on her journey, breakfasted in her room, and ordered the carriage to wait for her at the stables, so that no one should notice her departure. She was early at the station, but Lord St. Leger was there before her. He had taken her tickets, secured her a carriage, and made every possible arrangement for her comfort; but just as they started, a sudden change came over Maud's countenance.

"Have you forgotten anything?" he asked—"we can telegraph at the next station."

"Oh, no; but suppose Mrs. Ainslie should be away?"

"Do you mean that she does not expect you?"

"Not to-day—some time, perhaps—it was a promise."

"Well, we must hope for the best," said Lord St. Leger cheerfully—"at all events, it is too late to ascertain that now."

What could it mean? He was more and more mystified.

Meanwhile, there was considerable consternation at Carrisbridge at Maud's disappearance.

"Is not Mrs. Stuart come in?" inquired Mrs. Leslie of the old servant, when she came down to luncheon.

"And no place laid!" echoed Miss Campbell.

"Where is she gone, then?" said Mrs. Leslie.

"I don't know," said the old man, rather

crossly—he liked Maud; "the carriage has been back some time."

"Come back without her!—who went with her?—where did she go?"

"We went to the station," said a footman, coming forward. "Mrs. Stuart went on a journey, I think. Mrs. Martin was with her and some luggage."

"Where to?" asked Mrs. Leslie sharply. "I suppose you know, if you took her ticket."

"I did not take the tickets, ma'am; a gentleman met her—some one from Camelford, I think—at least, Sir Henry Johnston's dog-cart was there, for I spoke to the groom."

Mrs. Leslie's dismay was extreme.

"Stuart coming home at three! What can I say to him?"

"Mr. Stuart cannot expect you to be answerable for Mrs. Stuart's vagaries, I should think," rejoined Miss Campbell. She felt no anxiety on Maud's account, and was rather glad than otherwise of the excitement her disappearance created. But Mrs. Leslie was greatly perturbed, and declared that she must go to the station herself to meet her son; but as the afternoon turned to a drizzling rain, she gave up her intention, and sat in her room, dreading his arrival.

On his arrival, Lee met him at the door, and in answer to his inquiry whether the telegram had been received, replied that it had, and that his orders had been attended to.

"Where is Mrs. Leslie?" inquired Stuart.

"She is in her room, sir. Shall I go and tell her that you are come?"

"No, I will go to her," and taking Bianca by the hand, led her into his mother's room.

"I have brought my child to receive your blessing, mother," said Stuart, leading her forward, and saying something to her in Italian.

The girl knelt down, and timidly kissed Mrs. Leslie's hand. Mrs. Leslie looked considerably surprised, but not displeased, and Stuart hoped that Bianca had made a favourable impression upon her.

"I must go to Maud, mother. May I leave Bianca with you?"

"Maud is not at home, Stuart. She left this morning," said Mrs. Leslie, bracing herself up for the coming trial.

"Maud not at home!—left this morning? What can you mean? Where is she gone?"

"That I am unable to tell you. She asked for the carriage, and went to the station. I knew nothing of it till I was told that the carriage had returned without her."

"But you surely must know where she is gone? The servants must know——"

"Indeed I do not—nor does anyone appear to know more than I do. The footman who went with the carriage said that some gentleman from Camelford took her tickets; but, beyond that, I know nothing—not even who the gentleman was, nor where she went."

This was a severe blow to Stuart Leslie, and one for which he was wholly unpre-

pared. His indignation at Maud's conduct was mingled with self-reproach, for he was conscious that Maud had not been treated with the confidence to which, as his wife, she was entitled. The deception, or, at least, the culpable want of straightforwardness with which he had begun, had led to graver complications, as people invariably plough deeper into a wrong groove upon which they have once entered.

Stuart Leslie could scarcely rally from the shock produced by the intelligence of Maud's sudden departure; but the presence of Bianca checked any further remarks, and he took her away, saying he would find her maid Elena, who had accompanied them.

"When I have seen Morris I will return," he said to his mother.

Morris had been his nurse, and now for many years housekeeper at Carrisbridge. He was anxious to enlist her sympathies on behalf of Bianca, who would be very lonely; and, much as the prejudiced old woman disliked foreign folk, Bianca's appearance, and Stuart's ingratiating manner, quite won her heart.

"Will you take charge of Miss Leslie, Morris, and give her some coffee and bread and butter, and make her comfortable till I come back?"

"Miss Leslie, sir? Impossible!" And Morris looked, as she felt, thunderstruck. "You don't mean it, sir?"

"Yes, indeed I do, Morris. She is my daughter, and has never been in England before."

"Cannot she speak English, sir? How

shall I make her understand, or know what she wants? Well, to be sure, she is a sweet, pretty creature, and no mistake!"

"She is very quick, and will soon learn enough to make herself understood. You must help to teach her, Morris."

Mrs. Morris was too much astonished to ask any further questions, and Stuart left her to try to elicit some further details of Maud's strange conduct.

"Now, mother, let me understand more about Maud. Do you think her father met her?"

"Not that I know of. I told you all I knew. Edward said it was some gentleman from Camelford; but he probably does not know," she added, when she saw her son's pale and agitated face.

"I must inquire into this at once," he

said. "Do not wait dinner for me if I should be late. I must ride over to Camelford."

"Not now, surely, late as it is," remonstrated Mrs. Leslie.

"If anyone met her from Camelford, Lady Johnston can probably tell me all about it."

Mrs. Leslie remained silent, but doubted the wisdom of her son's proceedings.

the hope that you may be able to enlighten me and relieve my anxiety."

"I am afraid I cannot help you much," replied Lady Johnston; "but I believe she is now with Mrs. Ainslie. I was unfortunately not at home when she called for Mrs. Ainslie's address, but Lord St. Leger met her at the door and told her where she lived. She seemed, he told me, greatly disturbed in her mind, and resolved upon going immediately to Durham, where Mrs. Ainslie lives, and at her request Lord St. Leger explained to her how to get there."

"Mrs. Ainslie!" replied Stuart in surprise. "Do you mean the lady that we met here?"

"Yes; she took an immense fancy to

your young wife, and invited her to pay her a visit."

"But who went with her? What gentleman took her tickets?"

"Lord St. Leger was leaving us that day, and he proposed to accompany Mrs. Leslie as far as Durham, as she seemed so inexperienced about travelling. It may not have been a very wise proceeding, but I need not say to you, Mr. Leslie, that it was nothing more. I know that Lord St. Leger said he was sure you would not approve of Mrs. Leslie travelling about the country alone."

"Certainly not; but I less approve of her travelling alone with Lord St. Leger," he said angrily.

"It was foolish, no doubt, but nothing

worse, and you must not think too much of it. Just consider how young she is. I believe most firmly that Lord St. Leger thought as much of you as he did of her. He said that Mrs. Leslie seemed to be greatly worried about something, but she did not tell him the cause."

"I wish she had seen you, Lady Johnston. You might have persuaded her not to leave home."

Lady Johnston paused, and after a moment's reflection, said,

"You will not be offended if I speak to you openly, Mr. Leslie?"

"Certainly not; it will be very kind."

"I think you are inclined to expect too much from your young wife. She is very charming, and has evidently been much petted. But she is too young to be thrown

entirely back on her own resources. She needs companionship and sympathy, and would resent being treated more as a child than a wife. She is something more than a plaything. She cannot be happy if you do not give her the position to which, as your wife, she is entitled, and I know the danger of a warm, impulsive nature thrown back upon itself, and feeling isolated in her home. Your mother is scarcely a companion for her, nor, indeed, would she understand her. Anyone can see how devoted she is to you, and I feel sure you could lead her to be everything you wish, but she never will be driven, Pray forgive me for my plain-speaking, and tell me if there is any way in which I can be of any use. Shall I write to Mrs. Ainslie?"

"No, thank you," he replied sadly. "Now

I know where Maud is I can write, or go to her if she likes. Thank you for all your kindness, Lady Johnston. I must return home, as my mother will be expecting me."

"I believe that mother to be at the bottom of all this," was Lady Johnston's unspoken thought.

"Pray let me know as soon as Mrs. Leslie returns," she said aloud; "for we cannot spare anything so bright and charming from this dull neighbourhood. It is a real pleasure to me only to see her."

Lady Johnston's information had taken a load from Stuart's mind, but he felt doubtful as to the best mode of action. He told his mother that Maud had gone to pay a short visit to Mrs. Ainslie at Durham, and that he intended to write to her and tell her of his return.

"Do you intend to fetch her back?" asked his mother, not over-pleased to see her son comparatively at ease.

"I can do what she likes about that, mother; but it is past your dinner-hour. Pray do not wait any longer."

The dinner was a dull, silent meal, only varied by Miss Campbell's incoherent ejaculations, which did not meet with the usual response from Mrs. Leslie. Stuart did not wish for any further discussion about Maud, and shut himself up in his study as soon as dinner was over.

"What a strange thing for young Mrs. Leslie to do!" said Miss Campbell, as soon as they were alone. "I made sure that some gentleman had come into it, and now it is only a visit to a lady-friend. Why did not she say so?"

"I really do not know; and I think it would be more becoming in you, Abigail, not to comment on Mrs. Stuart's actions. Doubtless, she had sufficient reasons for what she did."

"Really, now; do you think so?" said the discomfited Abigail, feeling sure that, in Mrs. Leslie's present state of mind, she would have found fault with whatever she said; so she wisely took refuge in silence, till, suddenly remembering Bianca's existence, she asked if she should bring her downstairs.

"That child?" replied Mrs. Leslie doubtfully. "No, I think to-morrow will be quite soon enough to see her, and to consider what is to be done with her. As my granddaughter," she added, somewhat stiffly, "she will, of course, receive all

proper attention, but I do not yet know in what relation that woman stands to her—whether maid, governess, or companion."

"It is all very awkward, very awkward indeed," replied Abigail, "but till she can speak English, she must require some one with her. Would Mr. Stuart like me to go and see that she has all that she requires?"

"How can you be of any use if she does not understand English, nor you Italian?" said Mrs. Leslie, provoked at Miss Campbell's pertinacity; "but I see you want some sort of gossip, so you had better go."

Nothing disconcerted, Abigail Campbell trotted off in search of Bianca, but she was in bed and asleep, and Elena kept too strict a watch to allow her to be disturbed,

so she gained nothing by her manœuvre to find out more of this strange story.

Stuart's letter to his wife was eminently characteristic:

"My dear Maud,

"My surprise was great, on my return home, to find that you had taken advantage of my absence to leave my mother alone, and still greater that you should have done so without leaving any address. I only learned it at Camelford. I hope you will return as soon as possible, and that such a thing will never occur again. Let me hear from you by return of post.

"Your affectionate husband,

"Stuart Leslie."

Maud read this letter with great indig-

nation. Her husband had not even alluded to the subject which had given her so much pain. He had completely ignored the strange story of his former marriage, and had given no contradiction or explanation of all that those people had asserted.

"I will write at once; by return of post, as he wishes," she thought, "and tell him what I think."

Had Maud paused to reflect, she might have worded her letter very differently; as it was, it ran thus:

"My dear Stuart,

"I have just received your letter. I could not suppose that, after your conduct towards me—never giving me your confidence, to which I consider I had every claim, nor taking the trouble to explain

that strange story which has caused me so much pain and trouble—you would take any interest in my movements. I thought it best to leave Carrisbridge as I was not allowed to share your confidence, and I do not propose to return till I have reason to suppose that I shall be treated differently. Mrs. Ainslie is very kind, and allows me to remain here for the present.

"Your affectionate wife,

"MAUD LESLIE."

"My first letter to Stuart since my marriage — a curious love-letter!" she thought bitterly, as she folded it up and directed it with heightened colour and flashing eyes, showing how deeply she was moved.

Mrs. Ainslie, when she met Maud at

luncheon, noticed her excited look, and, as they left the dining-room, she said, putting her hand on Maud's shoulder,

"You seem vexed, my child. Surely something has occurred to put you out. I hoped you would have joined me in the cathedral, and since I came in, I would not disturb you, as I heard you were in your room. Have you been very busy?"

"Rather. I have been writing, and not very pleasantly," Maud added, in a hard tone. "I have had a letter from Stuart, which I have answered, as he wished, by return of post."

"I hope you have not written hastily, dear Maud," said Mrs. Ainslie anxiously. "As you kindly told me all that had happened, I cannot help feeling the deepest interest in all you do."

"That will be nothing, then," she replied, "as you let me stay here, for I shall not go back as things are."

Mrs. Ainslie looked grave.

"Dear Maud, I hope you have done nothing rash. Of course, I am delighted to have you with me, but your proper place is in your own home, and if Mr. Leslie wants you——"

"Then let him explain all this, and give me his confidence," said Maud hotly. "I have a right to it. Let him tell me all, as I feel sure he has told his mother, and then it will be time enough for me to think what I will do."

"But you do not know how much, or if any of it is true," remonstrated her friend. "At all events, I hope you have written as

a young wife should," said Mrs. Ainslie, taking her hand.

Maud burst into tears.

"I do not want to worry or annoy you," said Mrs. Ainslie kindly; "I only wish you to profit by the experience of an old woman. It is so easy to sow dissension in a home, and so difficult to restore trust and peace; and then you must remember that Mr. Leslie has a right to your obedience, if he wishes you to go back to him."

"Obedience!" repeated Maud—"I do not think so, if I am treated like this."

"In any case, it must be right, dear child. But probably you have written to say that you will do whatever he wishes."

"Indeed I have not, and I shall not, unless *he* does what he ought to do," replied Maud doggedly.

Mrs. Ainslie saw it would be useless to pursue the subject any further then, and, asking her if she would go out with her, went out of the room, leaving Maud standing by the window.

The life she led with Mrs. Ainslie was very different from that she usually led. It was very quiet, but yet full of interest, and had a soothing influence upon her impulsive temperament. The hours in the day were all filled up, none hanging heavily on her hands as they did at Carrisbridge. There was work among the poor, books to read with Mrs. Ainslie, much to see and to admire in the picturesque old town, and the cathedral, which was a never-ending source of interest. Then friends of Mrs. Ainslie—literary men, whose conversation gave Maud intense

pleasure, and elicited much that had been lying dormant—came to enliven the evenings.

Mrs. Ainslie took pains to cultivate anything that appeared to amuse her, and hoped that, by widening and diversifying her interests, she might infuse a tone into her life that would counteract the passing impressions of the hour. She felt a deep interest in, and even affection for, Maud. Her very faults had a certain charm in them, from her great candour and the absence of all pretension; but Mrs. Ainslie doubted whether Mr. Leslie could sympathise with her, and understand the just cause she had for complaint.

When she came down from her room, she found Maud waiting for her; but the cloud had not passed away from her face,

and the letter which she had written and sent to her husband did not seem to have afforded her that relief which generally springs from action.

Mrs. Ainslie did all in her power to divert Maud's mind from the subject which naturally occupied it, and pointed out to her the beautiful view as the passing clouds cast their shadows fitfully over it. At one time the distance seemed lighted up by the golden sunlight when broad shadows suddenly moved across the scene, as the flying clouds for a brief moment obscured the sun. It was impossible for Mrs. Ainslie to continue to ignore Maud's state of mind, and her intense compassion for her impelled her to inquire—

"When do you expect a reply to your letter, Maud?"

"I do not know," she answered abruptly; and then added, on reflection, with a certain sadness in her voice—"Perhaps he will never write."

"You cannot think that. He is not revengeful or unforgiving?"

"I am not sure. He thinks a wife has no other duty than to obey and accept her fate without a murmur or a comment."

"Surely you did not think this when you married him!"

"Ah, but it was all so different then! And now——"

Maud paused, and Mrs. Ainslie added—

"How I wish, dear child, you could see all this more as I do!"

"What do you mean? You would not have me act differently? I could not pretend to be what I am not. I cannot con-

ceal what I feel. You surely cannot think that I have no cause to complain?"

"Far from it. I feel for you very deeply, and I blame Mr. Leslie; but it does not follow that I think you have acted wisely. It is not always well to resent the injustice of those with whom it is our duty to live at peace. To bear and forbear is a lesson that only life can teach; and many an estrangement begins from an impatience with either the circumstances or the restraints of our daily life."

"But why did he marry me if he did not intend to treat me as his wife? Oh, Mrs. Ainslie, you do not know how great my trial is, loving him as I do. I thought there was no one like him, and now I find that he is not what I believed him to be, and that I have given up everything for an

idea. You never can tell what a shock this is to me. I have now nothing to live for."

"Nothing to live for, dear Maud? Oh! do not say that. You have even a greater work to do than you could ever have contemplated. To win his confidence, to comfort him, and gain the victory over yourself. The romance of life may possibly be gone, but there is yet much left to be done in the calm and patient fulfilment of the duties of your life, from which you cannot escape. Remember that the wrongs we suffer at the hands of others cannot really hurt us, if, in spite of all, we do what is required of us."

"You surely would not have me go back to him?"

"Not just now—not while *you* are so

full of resentment, and *he* probably stern and offended."

Mrs. Ainslie felt sure that Maud's return would only be a question of time, and that she would soon become restless under the separation from her husband. This did occur sooner than she anticipated. As day after day passed, Maud wearied herself with conjectures as to how he had taken her refusal to go back to him, and the wish to hear something of him grew stronger. Anything, she thought, would be better than silence.

Maud asked her maid, one morning, if she had heard from Carrisbridge.

"Oh! yes, ma'am," was the ready answer, "and there do seem to be such changes."

"Changes? I don't know what you mean," said Maud indifferently.

"I mean all about the strange young lady that cannot speak a word of English, and has a foreign maid. She is called Miss Leslie, too," and Martin paused, as if waiting for some comment or explanation from her mistress, but none came.

"Yes, I daresay. It does not matter," said Maud, assuming a careless and indifferent manner. But it did matter, inasmuch as it gave her the information she wished for.

CHAPTER IX.

AFTER that day Mrs. Ainslie detected a change in Maud, and so much depression and evident anxiety, that she imagined she must have heard from Mr. Leslie, and one day she asked her if that was so.

"No," Maud answered wearily; "but I was right about that girl. I knew I was. Martin told me all about her to-day, and that she is living at Carrisbridge."

Mrs. Ainslie felt sure that, in Maud's present state of mind, it would be useless

to moot the question of her immediate return, and was in great perplexity as to the best mode of proceeding. She felt strongly that things ought not to remain in their present state, but doubted if writing to Mr. Leslie would have any good effect, or if Maud would not resent her doing so as an interference about which she was rather tenacious. If she wrote to Mr. Leslie to come to Durham, Maud might refuse to return with him, which would make matters only worse. After long and anxious reflection, writing to Mr. Hasseldine was the only alternative that suggested itself, for Mrs. Ainslie did not know whether Maud's family were aware of the state of things at Carrisbridge.

At last she wrote a few lines to Mr. Hasseldine, saying that she was not sure

whether he knew that Maud had left her home for a time, and was at present her guest, and that, much as she enjoyed her society, she was doubtful whether her parents would approve of her remaining so long away from her husband. She trusted Mr. Hasseldine would understand the motives that prompted her to write, and added that, if he would like to see Maud, nothing would give her so much pleasure as to receive him as her guest.

This letter excited the greatest consternation at Hurst Manor, and Mr. Hasseldine rushed upstairs to his wife with Mrs. Ainslie's open letter in his hand, looking utterly bewildered.

"Bless me, Mr. Hasseldine, what can be the matter? How you startled me!"

"There is plenty the matter, my dear. You wondered that Maud did not write, and here is a letter from—I declare I don't know whom it is from—saying that she has left her home—is gone to Durham."

"Left her home! Let me see," exclaimed Mrs. Hasseldine, snatching the letter out of his hands. "H. Ainslie! I know who it is—the lady Maud took such a fancy to when she went to stay at that place where she met Lord St. Leger. Oh, how I wish——But there, it's no good to wish now. Ainslie is the name, sure enough. Of course you will go?"

"Yes; but what shall I do when I get there?"

"How am I to tell? Find out what is

the matter, and, if she will not go home, bring her here. What can Leslie have done? I never liked that man."

"Well, I can go to-day by the twelve o'clock train, so I had better be off at once," and he hurried out of the room, leaving his wife in utter dismay at such unexpected news.

Mrs. Ainslie had not told Maud of her letter to Mr. Hasseldine, so she was extremely astonished when her father walked into the room. She was quite overcome at seeing him, and threw herself into his arms sobbing convulsively.

"What is all this, my darling? Why are you so unhappy? I have come to see if you will come home with me for a time. Your mother is longing to see you," and he looked appealingly at Mrs. Ainslie.

"Would you like me to talk to your father, Maud?" said Mrs. Ainslie, laying her hand upon Maud's shoulder. "It may be better, I think."

Maud gave a mute assent, and left the room, leaving Mr. Hasseldine and Mrs. Ainslie alone. Mrs. Ainslie then told him all the facts of the case as far as she could, but Mr. Hasseldine's indignation, when he heard of Stuart Leslie's previous marriage, which he had so carefully concealed from everyone—even from his own mother—was extreme. He did not seem to be able to take in any other fact.

"Married before! Grown up daughter by that marriage! He certainly ought to have told me. I call it deception—a gross deception, and then leaving Maud in the dark all this time. I call it a shame—an

infernal shame. I wish I could see the fellow and give him a bit of my mind."

"I am glad you cannot while you are so angry with him," said Mrs. Ainslie quietly. "You must remember that no one was ever told, not even his mother, till quite lately."

"I do not see how that mends matters. I suppose he would not have told now if he could have helped it. So this daughter's coming to England was the reason of Maud leaving her home. Why did she not come to us at once? I am very much indebted to you for taking charge of the poor child."

"It has been a great pleasure to me. I am very fond of Maud. But I am sure you will agree with me, Mr. Hasseldine, in thinking that the one thing to be consid-

ered is not to add in anyway to Maud's unhappiness, which a quarrel between you and her husband would certainly do."

"God bless me, ma'am! Do you mean that I am to sit down quietly and take no notice of it? It's not in human nature, it's not indeed," and Mr. Hasseldine walked up and down the room in considerable perturbation.

"No," replied Mrs. Ainslie, "certainly not. I want you to act in some way as a medium between Maud and her husband, and set all this right. Mrs. Leslie's marriage is an unalterable fact, and every effort should be made to bring about a reconciliation between her and Mr. Leslie. I am sure she is very unhappy about it, and would be glad to return to Carrisbridge if it can be managed."

"But," said Mr. Hasseldine, "I promised her mother to bring Maud back with me."

"Of course; for it seems only natural that, away from her husband, she should be with her parents. But it will be better, if you can, to appease her sense of injury, and, if possible, make Mr. Leslie understand how just a cause she has for complaint. I believe he is too much annoyed with her for leaving Carrisbridge to see things fairly."

Mr. Hasseldine was a sensible man, and at once grasped the difficulties he had to contend with, and, after a few minutes' silence, said,

"I see it all, but cannot tell what to do for the best. Anyhow, I must take Maud

with me, and then write to Leslie and tell him where she is."

Mrs. Ainslie agreed, and Maud was summoned to hear their decision. She felt that she could not prolong her visit to Mrs. Ainslie indefinitely—that her return to Carrisbridge in the present state of things was impossible; but she shrank from going home and from her mother's comments on her present position, but, detecting a look of pained surprise on her father's face as he noticed her hesitation, she said at once,

"When do you go, papa? I will be ready."

"Any time to-morrow—any time you like."

"Do stay, then, over to-morrow," said

Mrs. Ainslie kindly. "I am not at all reconciled to parting with Maud. It will give her more time; and I should like to show you some of the beauties of this place. I must wish you good night now, Mr. Hasseldine; and you will be glad of some rest after all your fatigue and anxiety."

Maud did not know whether to be glad or sorry at all that had happened. "Perhaps Stuart will write to papa," she thought; "and then, if that girl is gone, I can go home. I cannot go if she is there. I never could face that."

How little she knew the future in store for her!

She and her father went home on the day that had been fixed, and there was a sense of rest and peace when she was once more clasped in her mother's arms, though she

shrank from her somewhat rough greeting and comments.

"Pray let me rest, mamma," she said wearily. "I am so tired. We can talk of this another time."

"So you shall—so we can, darling," replied Mrs. Hasseldine; "only I can think of nothing else, so it's no wonder I ask you. But there, never mind. I daresay your father can tell me all about it."

Mr. Hasseldine wrote a very short and concise letter to Mr. Leslie, telling him that he had taken Maud away from Durham, and had brought her to Hurst Manor as soon as he knew of her being there. He hoped Mr. Leslie would give him some explanation of the circumstances that had so deeply wounded Maud, and inquired whether it was true that a daughter by a

former marriage which he had concealed was living at Carrisbridge. Mr. Hasseldine further represented to Mr. Leslie that it would be impossible for his daughter to return to Carrisbridge, and find a stranger domesticated there, without some explanation from him, accompanied by expressions of regret for the deception that had been practised upon them all, and especially for the want of confidence shown towards Maud, of whose devotion to himself Mr. Leslie could never have had one moment's doubt.

To this Mr. Hasseldine only received a few lines, acknowledging the letter, but not vouchsafing either explanation or apology, or, indeed, comment of any kind. No one knew what to do.

Mrs. Ainslie had promised to pay a visit at Hurst Manor if Maud did not return to Carrisbridge immediately, and to this Maud was looking forward as the one thing that would make her present life endurable, for the old charm of home was gone, and she regretted more and more that she had left Carrisbridge so hastily.

Mr. Hasseldine begged Mrs. Ainslie to come at once, for Maud seemed to be drifting into a state of utter stagnation. A visitor might sometimes arouse her for a moment, but she soon relapsed into silent depression. Her mother was in despair, but tears and reproaches to her husband, and entreaty to Maud, were all equally without effect; and day after day passed in dreary monotony.

Life was not bright at Carrisbridge. Stuart Leslie shut himself up more and more, brooding over his troubles till he persuaded himself that he alone had been sinned against. His mother was full of self-reproach, feeling that, if she had taken any pains to gain Maud's confidence and affection, this state of things could not have occurred; but the habits of an old woman, who had been long accustomed to rule, could not be easily laid aside, and Maud's youth and beauty seemed to Mrs. Leslie a sufficient justification for treating her as a child who had to be educated. She had been ill, and was weakened by a long and severe cold, which confined her to her room, and Stuart's meals with Miss Campbell became positively repulsive to him.

"How do you feel to-night, mother?" he asked one evening that he found her alone.

"Ill and weary, my son. What can I expect at my age? But I wanted to see you. Have you heard from your wife?"

"No, mother. I believe she objects to Bianca's living here, and, as I cannot turn her adrift, I see no remedy."

"I am sorry she does not know her; no one could help loving her that did."

"She is a gentle, loving girl, mother. I am glad, very glad, she has a friend in you."

"She would have one in Maud, if they could meet. Stuart, how long is this state of things to continue?" She spoke so sadly, so gently, so perfectly unlike herself, that her son looked at her in surprise.

"It is Maud's own doing. Her home is open to her when she chooses to return to it."

"She has not, I fear, been fairly dealt with. She has been probably startled and annoyed by all that has occurred. You must not forget she is your wife. I think you should urge her to return at once. Have you done this?"

"Certainly not."

Stuart Leslie inherited much of his mother's unbending nature, and that he should be the first to make overtures to his young wife he could not for a single moment contemplate. She, he considered, had sinned against him, and it was for her to make the *amende*. Her supposed antipathy to Bianca irritated him; and yet it

need not have been so. She would have done all that he could desire, had he only treated her kindly, and asked her to love his child for his sake. But it was not in Stuart's proud and stern nature to be conciliatory, and so the misunderstanding continued.

Meanwhile Mrs. Leslie's health declined perceptibly. Day after day showed the progress disease was making in a frame enfeebled by age. She seemed restless and uneasy, and was continually recurring to Maud's absence.

"Do you want to see her, mother? I will tell her so, or fetch her, if you like. But I think the wish to return should come from her, and if that depends upon my sending Bianca away, I cannot do it—

in fact, I ought not—the child has no other home."

"It is all very difficult," said Mrs. Leslie, with a deep sigh; "but on a bed of sickness everything looks so different. The thought that in some measure it may be my fault weighs upon me. Stuart, if I should never see Maud again, give her my love and blessing—ask her to forgive me, and not think unkindly of me."

"What nonsense, mother!" he replied, considerably startled. "Your cold will be well in a few days. Of course, Maud will return soon, but it does not appear to me to be a wise proceeding to ask her to return before she is fully aware of how wrongly she has behaved."

Mrs. Leslie made no reply, but turned away to her own silent thoughts.

Stuart spoke to Miss Campbell that evening, and found, to his dismay, that she had a very bad opinion of his mother's health, and that the doctor gave but little hope of any permanent recovery. He at once telegraphed for further advice, and told his mother what he had done.

"It is of no use, my son. You should have asked me first, for I feel weaker every day."

The new doctor came, but only confirmed the other's opinion, so that Stuart now became fully aware of his mother's state.

Meanwhile, another cause for anxiety was developing itself. Bianca's health was far from satisfactory. Languid and listless, she seemed to suffer from the climate more than either Mrs. Leslie or

Miss Campbell could understand. She sat all day cowering over the fire, and if anyone urged a more active life, she only shed tears, which she seemed to have no power to control. Even Elena seemed at a loss to understand her state, and her father was beginning to wish for Maud's return, thinking that the companionship of a young person might rouse her.

He alluded to his anxieties in the course of one of his visits to Lady Johnston. She was a kind-hearted woman, brimming over with sympathy for sorrow of any kind. She would readily have given any assistance in her power, but the one conclusion at which she arrived was the desirableness of Maud's return. This she urged as strongly as she dared, but Leslie was too

reserved to enter at any length into domestic matters, and so Lady Johnston only half understood how things were with him. She wrote to Mrs. Ainslie, begging her to come on to Camelford when she left Hurst Manor, and inquired much about Maud. Mrs. Ainslie at once accepted the invitation, mainly influenced by a desire to promote Maud's return to Carrisbridge; but she wisely kept her own counsel, and said nothing to Maud of her intention.

After she had been there some little time, and knew the extent of old Mrs. Leslie's illness, and the anxiety that existed about Bianca's health, she wrote to Maud suggesting her immediate return, enlarging upon the opportunity it afforded for her usefulness to her husband, and trying

to make her feel how much the comfort of the sufferers depended upon her. But she failed in influencing Maud to set off at once, and while Stuart Leslie was hesitating whether to summon her, Mrs. Leslie sank rapidly, and the end came very suddenly at last.

The loss of his mother was a great shock to Stuart—greater than he could have imagined possible, prepared as he had been by her long illness. But those upon whom he lavished affection were very few, and his mother was a part of his life. Even the way she had always ruled him had made him more or less dependent upon her, and the few lines in which he announced to Maud the death of his mother, gave such tokens of grief that her first

impulse was to set off immediately and join him—for all resentment faded away before the stern reality of death, and she thought only of her husband as lonely and suffering. But, to her surprise, neither her father nor mother advocated this. They knew how absorbed her husband must be for the next few days, and how unable to devote himself to her as much as she might expect, and they feared that she would be wounded by what she might consider neglect, and urged her to wait longer, hoping that the time would arrive when she would return without risk of disappointment and failure.

That moment arrived sooner than they anticipated, for a second letter from Mrs. Ainslie, speaking of Bianca's illness as

serious, decided her not to delay her return to Carrisbridge.

How long the time seemed since she last crossed those far-stretching moors, and left the small railway-station, where, to her great relief, she caught sight of her husband waiting for her on the platform.

She had been very nervous about this first meeting, but in the hurry of alighting there was but little time for words, and none for conversation on the way home, as Mr. Leslie, having driven himself, took his seat on the box, leaving Maud to the society of her maid and her own troubled thoughts.

When they arrived at the house he gave her his arm, and led her up the steps in silence into his own room.

Maud looked up timidly.

"How is—your daughter?" she said, with some hesitation. "I hope she is better."

"I fear not. But I believe she is not an entire stranger to you?" he replied coldly.

"Can I see her? She is not too ill to see me, I hope? Oh, Stuart, I shall be so glad if I can be of any use or comfort to you or her."

Poor Maud felt as if she would give all she possessed for one kind word; but none came, and the measured coldness of her husband's reply froze up the tenderness with which her heart was full.

"I hope that you will be both," he said; "but your leaving your home as you did

was, to say the least, unfortunate. She has been so completely alone."

The tones of Stuart Leslie's voice were not encouraging, and Maud's heart sank within her as she replied quickly,

"But she had you and others. Oh! Stuart, if you had only trusted me!"

"It is useless to go into that now," he said. "Perhaps some day you will explain it to me. There is no time now. But if you really wish to see Bianca, I will call her."

"No; let me go to her. It would be much better. Pray let me," she pleaded, feeling how far easier it would be to make her acquaintance unconstrained by her husband's grave face and manner, for Maud felt that there was a barrier between

them—a barrier which she had fondly hoped his mother's death would have removed.

"As you please; but I had better see her first, and prepare her for your visit. She is not strong enough to be taken by surprise."

Maud acquiesced in silence, and as the door closed behind Leslie, a sense of failure oppressed her. All her plans were disarranged by his sternness, and she felt that, with every desire to please him, she would never succeed in even gaining any insight into his wishes.

"Perhaps his daughter may be different, kinder, at all events—not so cold. Perhaps she may become a link between us. I should like to be able to love her, and

to make her care for me. That would make some difference—it would not be quite so lonely," she thought, as her mind travelled back to the last few weeks, to Mrs. Ainslie's kind companionship, and her parents' warm-hearted love. The contrast seemed so painful that her tears flowed rapidly, and she had considerable difficulty in controlling her emotion when she heard her husband's step.

"Will you come and see Bianca? She is anxious to see you."

She followed him upstairs into a large room that she scarcely remembered, opening into a dressing-room that was now fitted up as a sitting-room. There were books lying about, and drawings on the walls. Upon the sofa, which had been

placed under the window, lay a pale, slight girl, in a white dressing-gown. She looked so fragile, so pale and shadow-like, that Maud started. She had never realized her being so very ill. Maud went up to her, and kissed her affectionately.

"You will let me nurse you, I hope," she said gently. "I want to make you well again."

Bianca threw her arms round Maud, whispering, in her broken English,

"I am glad you are come. Only love me—that is all I want."

"You must not talk, Bianca mia," said her father, with a tenderness in his accent that struck poor Maud painfully, as it contrasted with his greeting of her on her return. It was long since she had heard

him speak so tenderly, and the thought suddenly rushed into her mind that a comparative stranger had monopolized the affection she yearned to possess.

She looked with admiration at the girl's beautiful features, her soft, dark hair, and large lustrous eyes, that seemed too bright for health or strength.

"Shall I go to my room and take off my bonnet," she asked her husband, in a low voice, "and then come back to her?"

But it was Bianca who answered, begging her to return as soon as possible.

Leslie looked pleased.

"If you could enliven or interest her, you would do her real good. England does not suit her. Do you think her very

ill?" he added anxiously, as he followed her upstairs.

"She is very pale and thin, but I can scarcely tell."

"If she could only get rid of her cough. She gets no rest at night, and that is telling upon her."

"Perhaps this climate is too cold for her," said Maud, shivering as she walked up the long passage that led to her room.

"Perhaps. I have often thought so. I will ask Dr. Hailes the next time I see him, but till now I could do nothing," he said—"nothing alone."

"And I have not been here to help you! Oh, Stuart, I am so sorry!" and she looked so sad and so contrite that Leslie was, for

the moment, touched, and, putting his arm round her, drew her towards him.

"I am so sorry," she said, laying her head on his shoulder; "do forgive me!"

"I do not think there is any need for forgiveness," he replied quickly, resuming, at the same time, his former manner. "It was unfortunate, that was all."

Poor Maud felt that all her efforts at conciliation were useless, and turned away sad and disappointed. She made no further overtures to her husband, but returned to Bianca.

Henceforward she spent more of her time in the sick-room. There the consciousness of being useful was a comfort to her, and the girl's grateful love a real pleasure. She began to reflect upon her

past life, and to reproach herself for so impatiently leaving home when she might have been useful to her husband, and so have made herself necessary to his happiness. In her self-reproaches she lost the recollection of her just cause of complaint.

She resolved to be more patient in future, and to learn and practise life's lesson of forbearance; but that sad knell of frustrated hopes "*too late*" sounded in her ears and became, as it were, the undersong of her life. At times her loneliness and depression were almost overwhelming, yet the thought of leaving Carrisbridge again never occurred to her. "Surely she could recover her husband's affection;" that now was her one object. She wished she could

talk over her difficulties with Mrs. Ainslie, and longed to ask her to pay her a visit, but was afraid to propose it, lest the idea should be unpalatable to her husband. Poor Maud! her very anxiety made her often ill-judged, and she threw over many small opportunities of infusing some brightness into her life.

Riding, which had been her great delight, she now gave up, and always negatived Leslie's proposal to do so, partly from a morbid dread of being alone with him, and of showing the acute pain his cold and constrained manner gave her. She believed that all the love of which he was capable he had transferred from her to Bianca, but this was not so. His affection for his wife had never changed, but he had been so

deeply wounded and mortified that his pride would not allow him to shake off the reserve in which he had wrapped himself. An inward sense of dissatisfaction increased the difficulties which prevented a complete reconciliation; so they both went their own way, and gave up all attempt to break down the barrier that had risen up between them.

Miss Campbell, who, in her own rough and peculiar way, really grieved for Mrs. Leslie, seemed to consider that Maud was in some way responsible for all the misfortunes that had befallen them, and was constantly talking in that sense. This at times gave Maud intense pain, but she was growing more patient and subdued, and refrained from any recrimination. It

was hard upon Maud that no one ever gave her Mrs. Leslie's messages, in which she asked her forgiveness, and blamed herself for her treatment of her. But it was perhaps scarcely to be expected that either Mr. Leslie or Miss Campbell would do so, for they both considered Mrs. Leslie blameless, and attributed her self-reproaches to merely physical causes, such as weakness and impaired health; and Maud meanwhile was learning the discipline of life of which the unkindness, injustice, and contradictions of others, form a very considerable ingredient. Her time was fully occupied in amusing Bianca, and the many devices she found for doing so were so successful that Dr. Hailes, at his next visit, gave a more favourable report of her, and even

wished her to go out the first day that was sufficiently mild to allow of her doing so. Maud told this to her husband in great delight, but he only shook his head. He had seen so plainly the end that was coming that this temporary rally had but little effect upon him.

One day he thanked Maud, but in his own stiff, unbending manner, for her attention to Bianca.

"Oh! Stuart," she exclaimed, "do not thank me for doing what is so great a pleasure to me. If only she could get stronger! But you do think, do you not, that when the Summer comes——"

"Never," he replied—"never; she may linger, but I cannot take her to Italy, and here she will never see another Winter."

"But why cannot we take her, Stuart? We could travel very slowly, and rest often, and you know that even Elena says I am Bianca's best nurse."

Maud had quite won Elena's love by her devotion to Bianca. At first the difficulties of speaking Italian had seemed insurmountable, but now both could understand her perfectly, and Bianca's broken English was a constant source of amusement. She, poor child! had not an idea of her own very critical condition, and talked happily of all that sunshine and Summer would do for her, and how she would then accompany Maud in her walks and drives. Bianca's love for Maud was quite enthusiastic, and she was restless if Maud was long away from her. With the

intuition of affection Maud became aware that the atmosphere of Carrisbridge, both morally and physically, was very unfavourable to Bianca's recovery, and resolved to consult Dr. Hailes as to the possibility of moving her to some warm seaside place in England, if Italy was out of the question, as Mr. Leslie had said.

The next time he came she followed him out of the room.

"Will you come with me for a few moments, Dr. Hailes? I wish to consult you."

"Certainly," he replied, looking surprised. "I trust you have not been overtaxing your strength."

Dr. Hailes was an old man, and had a great admiration for Maud, and gave no

credence to the many reports that had been circulated about her. If there had been any fault anywhere, he laid it on her husband—"that cranky fellow," as he always considered him; but as for Maud, she was "as sweet as milk, and bright as a sunbeam."

"I was not going to consult you about myself," said Maud quickly, "but to ask you if it would be good for Miss Leslie to go to some warmer place."

"Undoubtedly, if it were possible; but, though she is certainly somewhat better, the risk would be considerable."

"But you don't think—I mean, you do think she will recover?" said Maud anxiously.

"My dear madam, these things are not

in our hands. Miss Leslie is very ill—very seriously so; but still she has youth on her side, and that in itself is greatly in her favour. But no one can tell. And if this should be hereditary——"

"But perhaps it is not," exclaimed Maud, who knew nothing of Bianca's antecedents. "Only England is too cold for her. Mr. Leslie thought moving her to Italy might do her good; but——"

"Impossible—quite impossible!" quickly interrupted Dr. Hailes. "Torquay or Ventnor is all that could be attempted. But you must be careful not to discourage our patient," he said, somewhat alarmed at the expression of Maud's face.

"Oh, no. I should never think of speaking to her on this subject, I cannot help

feeling sanguine. She is so bright, so young! If only we knew what to do for the best!"

"You have already done much for her, my dear lady, by your society and care. It is to you that we are, I think, indebted for the improvement in her condition." Dr. Hailes spoke kindly, and Maud was deeply moved by his words. "Her father," he added, "is too anxious; nor is he quite the person to cheer so young an invalid. Give her all the companionship you can."

"Of course," said Maud sadly. "I only wish I had come sooner, but I never knew that Mrs. Leslie was so ill till it was too late."

"Yes, that was rather sudden at last;

but now you are a God-send to that poor girl who was pining for the society of something young and kind, like yourself. I hope you will not leave her yet awhile," he added, in a tone of inquiry.

"Certainly not. I never should think of doing so; and if you can devise any way of moving her, may I trust you to tell us?"

"Certainly, my dear, certainly."

Dr. Hailes bustled off, shaking his head, and muttering to himself,

"Ah! there will be but one move for her, poor girl! but I must not tell them so. I feel more pity for that young Mrs. Leslie. What ever will become of her when her occupation is gone, and the one inter-

est in her life is taken from her? Ah! dear me, it is strange how ill-assorted people often mate together."

CHAPTER X.

FROM henceforth Maud was continually talking to her husband of the possibility of moving Bianca, but he took too gloomy a view of her state to entertain the idea seriously, and so day after day passed on, only varied in monotony by the fluctuations in the sick-room. Leslie began to be uneasy about Maud, and fancied she looked pale and thin, and that her attention to Bianca was telling upon her. He was always trying to persuade her to go out, but with little success.

"You should go to Camelford, Maud, and see Lady Johnston. She has often inquired after you."

"I can, if you think Bianca will not want me. Can you drive me over, Stuart?"

"If you prefer my doing so," said Leslie, with some hesitation; "but men are always *de trop* in morning visits, and in the long gossip between ladies."

"But Lady Johnston is not a gossip. I like her very much; and I am sure I am too stupid to be able to talk much to anybody, so do come. It would be easier for me."

Leslie thought it might be a good thing for the country neighbours to see them driving together, and agreed accordingly.

In less than half an hour Maud was

seated by her husband, thoroughly enjoying the fresh air, after her long confinement to the house. She felt somewhat nervous about her visit, but Lady Johnston's kind and cordial manner quickly dispelled any uneasy feelings she had.

"I was thinking of writing to you," she said, turning to Maud. "I have seen so little of you lately, and I hoped to persuade you and Mr. Leslie to pay us a visit next week. I hope you have no other engagement."

"I am afraid it is impossible, for we could not leave Bianca. *I* certainly could not; she would be so unhappy without me, would she not, Stuart?"

"I am afraid she would. Maud has proved herself such an excellent nurse,

that my poor child cannot bear her out of her sight."

Maud looked pleased at her husband's words, and Lady Johnston was glad to observe the change, and was more than ever convinced that old Mrs. Leslie had been the bane of poor Maud's married life. She began to ask her about Bianca, as she seemed to be her one absorbing interest.

"I wish you would come and see her, dear Lady Johnston. She is so lovely, and I am sure she would like you so very much."

"That would be a great inducement," said Lady Johnston, laughing, "though I am not quite so sure of that as you seem to be. I will drive over to luncheon some

day next week, and then, if she is well enough, you can take me to see her, but not if it would tire her in the least degree. By-the-by, I have just seen a dear friend of yours who inquired about you."

"Whom do you mean—not Mrs. Ainslie? Has she been here?"

"No, not a lady—a gentleman."

"Lord St. Leger?" inquired Maud, blushing at the recollection of their last meeting. "He was very kind in escorting me to Durham. I was so helpless and ignorant about railway trains."

She spoke without any hesitation, and evidently without any idea that it might possibly annoy her husband.

Lady Johnston looked at her frank, ingenuous countenance admiringly, while Leslie said stiffly,

"Yes, it was very good of Lord St. Leger as I was away. Is he here, Lady Johnston? I shall be glad of an opportunity of thanking him for taking charge of Maud."

"No; he is with Sir Harry, but I hope he will come on here."

"I must make him drive me over to Carrisbridge when I come to see you next week."

"Pray do," said Maud. "But we must go now, Stuart; we have been away so long."

The drive home was a very silent one for some time. Both Maud and her husband seemed absorbed in their own thoughts. At last he said,

"I do not quite understand, Maud, how

you fell in with St. Leger. Did you meet him in the train?"

"Oh, no; he met me at the station. I rode over to Camelford to ask Lady Johnston about the journey to Durham, but she was out, and Lord St. Leger came up just as I was going away. He found out all about the trains for me, and said that as he was going home the next day he would take charge of me, as he was sure you would not like me to travel alone. I am afraid he must have thought me very stupid. I am glad you will thank him for me; he was so very kind."

"I shall certainly take the first opportunity of doing so," he replied coldly. "I hope that such a thing is never likely to occur again, but you must remember that

it is not at all *selon les règles* that young married ladies should travel about with any man who is not a near relation."

"I suppose not," replied Maud, blushing deeply, "but I could not think of anything at that moment."

Maud's frank and unembarrassed manner was sufficient to disarm the most suspicious person, so that even Leslie, who was extremely fastidious as to the conduct of women, could not lay anything but thoughtlessness to her charge, though that such a thing should have occurred to his wife had annoyed him exceedingly, and it unfortunately strengthened the idea of Maud's childishness that his mother had so persistently infused into his mind. It was on this account that any independent

action on Maud's part took him completely by surprise.

They soon arrived at home, and the subject was dropped, for Maud was so occupied by Bianca that she forgot Lord St. Leger's existence. It was not long before he called at Carrisbridge, when he showed so much pleasure at meeting with Maud that she was both surprised and gratified. She had been so starved of late from want of any expression of sympathy or interest that Lord St. Leger's manner was really welcome, though she wondered at herself for being so glad to see him and for talking to him so freely and openly. But the pleasure was very short-lived, for on looking up she saw her husband's eyes fixed upon her, and she at once became

nervous and confused. Lord St. Leger quickly detected the change, and began to talk more eagerly than ever.

"I see you have not discarded my ring," he said, stooping down to look at her hand. "It is very good of you to wear it."

Lord St. Leger was very short-sighted.

"Surely you did not expect me to do so?"

"No, but I thought it not unlikely you might have done so, considering your numerous possessions. Of course you know the theory about turquoises—how, if the feeling of the giver changes, the stone also changes from its bright blue to a dingy green."

"Well, mine is quite blue and bright,"

she said, laughing and holding it up for inspection.

"I was not thinking of that ring—that is not likely to change its colour," he said, in a low voice.

Maud began to regret the visit she had been so glad to receive, and said,

"I must wish you good-bye now, Lord St. Leger. I believe I am wanted up-stairs. When is Lady Johnston coming to see Bianca?"

"I don't know. I did not come from Camelford to-day. But are you not going to ride? I was in hopes I might have met you on my way here."

"Mrs. Leslie does not care for riding now," said her husband, answering for her. "It was a passing fancy, I suppose."

Maud gave him a reproachful look as she said—

"You know that that is not the case, Stuart. There is nothing I like so much."

"Then you deny yourself very much, for I can never persuade you to ride with me."

"Perhaps I do. I think I am learning that lesson," she said bitterly.

Lord St. Leger looked surprised, but only said—

"Then of course *I* cannot hope to persuade you;" and at once took leave.

Mr. Leslie followed him, and took the opportunity of thanking him for his care of Maud.

"So things are not all *couleur de rose* here," was his unspoken thought. "I won-

der what it all means? How can Leslie speak so crossly to that pretty little wife of his. She is too good for him."

Maud stood with tightly-compressed lips and glistening eyes. She thought her husband unjust to her, and contrasted his manner with Lord St. Leger's gentleness and consideration—rather dangerously for her own peace of mind. She was provoked with herself, too, for answering her husband as she did, but, resolving to exercise more self-command, she went as usual to Bianca, where Leslie found her later in the day.

She began to talk to Bianca about her removal to a warmer place, but, to her surprise, found her quite averse to the scheme. Maud was so unaccustomed to

illness that she did not consider the effort that even the thought of a journey must be to anyone so weak and prostrate, and showed her disappointment so plainly that Bianca looked weary and distressed.

"Some day, I daresay—but not now. Please say no more now."

"Very well, dear. I am afraid you are tired. Don't worry yourself. Dr. Hailes must settle it all. Only I fancied the change would make you strong again."

Once having taken up the idea, Bianca could not let it drop, and became feverishly impatient to carry it out. Her father anxious to please her, with the doctor's sanction, took a house at Torquay, the crossing to the Isle of Wight not being thought desirable for her. Everyone was

eager that there should be no delay, and the move was to be made as soon as possible.

The excitement this produced gave Bianca a sort of fictitious strength, and she bore the journey in a way that astonished her father.

It was late when they arrived at a pretty villa outside the town. There was a small garden, which Leslie fondly hoped Bianca might enjoy—and, indeed, she seemed so bright and happy that even he felt hopeful.

Maud was enchanted with her temporary home, and though Bianca was weary and jaded, still the complete change, the soft air and glittering sea, acted like a charm upon her. Maud stood long at the

window watching the reflection of the moon upon the sea, and wondering that two places in one small island could be so totally different as the cold desolation of Carrisbridge, and the soft beauty she saw before her, and, above all, she revelled in the great *swish* of the waves upon the pebbly shore. There were several fishing-boats close by, and sailors in their blue jerseys dotted about in the moonlight.

"I believe I might live happy here," she thought, "if everyone were kind to me, and Stuart were different. That cold, stiff manner makes me so unhappy."

She started when she saw her husband standing by her, as if her unspoken thoughts had been read.

"Do you think you shall like this place, Maud? It seems as if it must do Bianca good."

"It is quite beautiful, Stuart; so unlike any place I ever saw. I hope Bianca is not too tired to sleep."

"No; Elena seems in good spirits about her. But you must be tired, Maud."

All retired that night with hopeful anticipations. The next day dawned in a flood of sunlight that reminded Bianca of her Italian home. The sea was sparkling, the sky brilliantly blue, and the wind, though soft, exhilarating and refreshing. For a time she seemed quite renovated, and was able to take short drives in the neighbourhood, which gave her great pleasure, or go out in a chair to some

sheltered sunny nook among the rocks.

On these occasions her father and Maud walked by her side. She seemed so happy, took notice of many little things, and was so bright and interested, that they were both deceived as to her real improvement, Maud especially so. Her naturally sanguine nature made her hope that all would be well.

But this did not last long. One day, after a longer drive than usual, Bianca suddenly fainted. The swoon lasted so long, and there was so much difficulty in restoring animation, that her father was greatly alarmed, and sent for the nearest physician. Maud watched his grave countenance anxiously, but he returned evasive answers to her inquiries, and declared that there was no immediate danger.

From that day Bianca seemed to lose her rallying power. She was frequently quite unable to leave her sofa.

Maud watched every flicker of the lamp of life with the greatest anxiety—so much so that Bianca noticed it.

"Am I more ill that you look at me so?" she asked one day, when she suddenly opened her eyes and found Maud looking at her mournfully.

"I hope not, dear," she replied cheerfully; "but, you know, you have not been so strong the last few days, and I must not let you get tired."

"Ah! yes, I feel that, and that I shall never see my home again."

"This is your home," said Maud reproachfully.

"I know; but I shall never see Italy or Padre Antonio. I wish I could see him. At your home there is no priest, but Elena has seen one here."

"Would you like to see one?" asked Maud, considerably startled. "I will ask about it, and you shall see one if possible."

"May I? Elena said it would trouble my father."

"No, no, darling; nothing is a trouble that pleases you. I will go to him now."

Maud went to her husband and told him all that had passed, and he at once acquiesced, saying,

"Poor child! how forgetful I have been all this long time! Of course she was ac-

customed to see her priest constantly. I wish she had spoken sooner."

He went off immediately, on what seemed to him a strange errand, but he had noticed some Catholic publications in a bookseller's shop, and his inquiries there were soon answered. The priest's house was not far; but he was not at home, nor expected till night, so, leaving his card and a message, begged that Father Doran would call the next day. He returned at once to tell Bianca what he had done, and the gleam of joy that lighted up her countenance showed him how desolate her life must have been, without any sympathy on the one subject she had been brought up to consider the most important.

"Why did you not tell me sooner, my child?"

"I often asked Elena, but she said it would trouble you, but now it is all right."

Father Doran was a kind, simple old man, and his daily visits became Bianca's greatest pleasure. By degrees he broke to her how unlikely it was that she should ever leave the bed on which she lay. She bore it cheerfully, and seemed less depressed than she had been for weeks. There were times of exhaustion that were painful to witness, and the hot weather which had now set in was a great trial to her failing strength. She was most tenderly nursed by Maud and Elena, but her father could not bear to witness her sufferings.

One morning, feeling especially worn and weary, Maud left the house, and, un-

like her usual custom, went out of the garden down to the beach. She sat down upon an old boat that had been drawn up under the cliff, and looked out idly, without any especial interest in what she saw, till she observed a gentleman walking towards her.

She fancied he was not a stranger, but could not recall him to her memory till, on coming nearer, she saw, to her surprise, that it was Lord St. Leger.

He greeted her warmly.

"You are the last person in the world I expected to see, Mrs. Leslie. Have you been here long?"

"Yes; a month at least," she replied sadly.

"I hope that you have found it bene-

ficial?" he asked, with some hesitation, hardly daring to ask after Bianca.

Maud shook her head. She felt unable to speak. Lord St. Leger looked the sympathy he felt.

"Dear Mrs. Leslie, I am so grieved for you. My mother and sisters are here. Can they be of any use to you? Would Leslie see me?"

"Perhaps. We live at Adrian Villa—that house that stands in a garden just above. We seldom go out now."

"Is it too early for me to see him? Shall I return with you now?"

"No, thank you, I think not," said Maud hurriedly. She remembered her husband's remarks upon Lord St. Leger, and did not wish him to see them together.

"Very well. Is this your usual morning walk?"

"No; I seldom leave the garden."

"Then how shall I see you again?" he said impatiently, but his manner changed as he saw Leslie coming down the cliff towards them.

"I don't know; but please don't come with me now," she said nervously.

He quickly turned back, and Maud met her husband alone.

"Was that St. Leger?" he asked, in his most icy tone.

"Yes; I was so surprised to see him. His mother and sisters are here. He inquired if they could be of any use to us."

"Only by keeping away," he replied moodily.

"He wanted to see you, Stuart, but I did not encourage his coming now."

"I daresay you would like to see more people. This house of sickness must be very dull to you now."

"Stuart!" exclaimed Maud, deeply wounded and indignant. "Is this either fair or kind?—do I ever leave Bianca?"

"I do not wish you to victimize yourself so completely, and thought you might like to see these people."

"Oh, Stuart, how can I ever please you? You know that Bianca likes no one else to nurse her," and she turned away, feeling hopeless and mortified, and entered Bianca's room. There she always met with love and sympathy, and, desolate as she felt, what would her life be without her?

She tried to blind herself to Bianca's state, though she was really conscious of the change from week to week, if not from day to day. But she was not prepared for the change that came so suddenly at last. A violent fit of coughing ruptured a blood-vessel in the lungs. There was scarcely time for Father Doran to be summoned; she looked anxiously at Maud and her father, but never spoke again, and then peacefully and painlessly Bianca Leslie passed away.

Apparently the shock was greater to Maud than to her father. Her grief was so overwhelming that everyone felt surprised; but she mourned for many reasons independent of her love for her, one being that Bianca was the single link between

her and her husband, the only interest they had in common, and she dreaded their drifting further apart.

They remained at Torquay till after Bianca was laid in the sunny churchyard, which Maud felt she would herself have chosen in preference to the gloomy vault at Carrisbridge.

Lord St. Leger had called once, but no one had seen him, and Maud, with a nervous dread of his coming, was glad to go away, and find herself at Carrisbridge; and yet how lonely it was—grim, silent, and empty!

One day Leslie asked her if she would like to go to her mother, or invite her to stay with her, but Maud at once and decidedly refused. She would neither leave

home again, nor risk having anyone distasteful to her husband. He was out of health and out of spirits, and though she longed to suggest some change, she did not dare to do so, because she knew that he would not give her credit for any consideration for him, but would attribute it solely to her own desire for some other society than his. So she silently subsided into the sadness and stagnation of her life.

Sometimes Leslie watched with a pang the face that was once so bright, changing into a hopeless, weary expression; but he was too sad-hearted himself to make any effort to brighten her life. The old house seemed strangely empty. Elena had returned to Italy, and old Abigail Campbell

had gone to live out the remainder of her days upon the pension Mrs. Leslie had left her.

Lord St. Leger compared Maud to Mariana in the Moated Grange, in a visit he paid to Lady Johnston, but he wisely kept away from Carrisbridge.

One day the door opened suddenly, and before Leslie could hear who it was, Maud had darted forward with a cry of delight, and thrown her arms around her visitor.

"Dear Mrs. Ainslie, how glad I am to see you!" said Maud, clinging fondly to her old friend.

"I had many misgivings about coming here now, dear child; but being on my way to Scotland, I could not bear to pass so near without trying to see you.

But you look thin, Maud. Are you well?"

"Oh, yes, I believe so. I got rather tired at Torquay. But there is nothing to tire me now," she said sadly.

Mrs. Ainslie looked at her with the deepest compassion.

"I am afraid Maud has over-exerted herself," said Leslie, as he came forward to greet his wife's friend. "I hope you may be able to persuade her to take care of herself, Mrs. Ainslie. She does not mind me."

Stuart Leslie had not gone the right way to induce her to *mind him*. It was the selfish, egotistical manner in which he had denied her all sympathy that was leaving its indelible traces on her changed countenance,

and yet how great a claim she had upon him for her tender, loving care of Bianca, if not for the great wrong he had previously done her in withholding from her the confidence that was her due.

"I am sure Maud will do all you wish," said Mrs. Ainslie kindly. "I hope that this bracing air will quite set her up. Devonshire is very relaxing."

"Can we persuade you to stay with us a few days, Mrs. Ainslie, or to pay us a visit on your return? We are not likely to move."

Maud was touched by the sudden change in her husband's manner, and by his desire to please her, and showed in her countenance how much she hoped that Mrs. Ainslie would accede to his proposal.

"Do—pray do!" she said, in a low voice. "It would be such a boon to me!"

Mrs. Ainslie hesitated.

"I am not quite my own mistress in the matter, Maud. If I stay now, it would only be for one day. I might stay longer as I return."

"Oh! then that will be much the best. Then at least there will be one thing to look forward to," she said, with a sigh of weariness.

"You see Maud does not find this old place very attractive," said Leslie, with some bitterness, "but you, I hope, may find it bearable for a few days."

"I delight in an old house like this, Mr. Leslie." But she saw how difficult it was for two such opposite natures to amalga-

mate, and Maud noticed that she looked very grave.

"I must go now, dear Maud, but you will write to me; and I am sure you will try not to say anything to wound your husband," she added, in a low voice, as Leslie went out to order her carriage.

"Do you mean about looking forward to your coming? It is quite true, but I did not mean to vex him."

Mrs. Ainslie's words, however, gave her ample food for thought; and when her husband returned, he found her absent and pre-occupied.

"Well, what will you do, Maud, to get through the day, in this dull place?"

"I did not mean that it was dull, but I have no occupation now," she said sadly,

and her eyes filled with tears. "I am so glad you asked Mrs. Ainslie to come as she returns."

"I hope she will, for your sake. What do you say to a ride? Would you like to ride over to Camelford?"

Maud hesitated. She longed to ask if Lord St. Leger was there, but thought it better not to do so, and agreed to his proposal. They found no one at home, but Maud was glad she had ridden, and determined to do so every day, and found it a great resource; but still there were hours, and even days, of loneliness, which were hard to bear, and though she tried to be patient, to be cheerful was more than she could accomplish. She wrote long letters to Mrs. Ainslie, and found real comfort in

the replies she received, so full were they of wise counsel and tender sympathy.

The weather was becoming autumnal, but there were bright days when Maud could follow her usual habit of reading out of doors. She was not very fond of walking, but to be in the fresh air with a book she liked was her greatest pleasure.

One day she was sitting dreamily with a book in her hand, when she heard a step approaching, but, thinking it was one of the gardeners, did not even look up, till Lord St. Leger's voice close by startled her.

"Dear Mrs. Leslie, how glad I am to see you. I was told you were out somewhere in the garden, and I ventured to look for you. I am so glad I found you."

"I seldom go from the house now," said Maud, blushing deeply as she rose to greet him, "except when I ride."

"Are you better than when I last saw you?" he said, looking earnestly into her face. "You seem better. I hope you feel so."

"I am very well," said Maud wearily. "I hope Mrs. Ainslie will come here next week." She was glad to speak of the subject that was uppermost in her mind.

"Indeed! That will be a pleasure to you. She is a great friend of yours, I think?"

"Yes; a great friend—my only friend."

"You cannot expect me to allow that assertion to pass uncontradicted," said Lord St. Leger reproachfully. "Don't

you know that you have friends who would do anything for you?"

"I don't know them," she replied carelessly; "but it is of no consequence."

Lord St. Leger was silent for a moment, and then pointed to the ring he had given her.

"That little talisman ought to remind you of one who would be glad to serve you."

"People were very kind when we were in such trouble," she said, purposely ignoring his meaning; "but that is different from one real friend—one that would be a friend always."

"Let me be your friend, dear Mrs. Leslie. Is there any way in which I can help you?"

"None, thank you. I don't want any help, and if I did——"

"I am not the person you would take it from. I beg your pardon. I had no intention of being impertinent."

"I never thought you so," said Maud, greatly distressed. "Pray say no more about it, I think we are talking nonsense," she added with a smile.

"Well, I won't talk any more now. I must go back at once; but I was too near not to try to see you."

"Are you then at Camelford?"

"No, at Escrigg Manor. I am only come for a day or two. You will promise that if I can ever be of the smallest use or comfort you will tell me?"

"Thank you; I will certainly."

In a moment Lord St. Leger had disappeared, and then Maud reproached herself for having been uncourteous, almost ungrateful.

Was it worth telling her husband of this visit? It was so short, and never likely to be repeated. Still there was a truthfulness in Maud's nature that made concealment distasteful to her.

"I saw Lord St. Leger to-day. He came to me while I was sitting in the garden this morning. I suppose you were out and did not see him, Stuart?"

"I have not been out," he replied coldly. "He probably did not ask for me."

"He must have done. There must be some mistake."

"How so? If he came to see you, he would not ask for me."

"Of course he did not come to see me alone," said Maud quietly.

Leslie made no reply, and so the subject was dropped.

Mrs. Ainslie proposed to come the following Monday, and Maud counted the hours till her arrival. Mr. Leslie was courteous and civil, and her visit was altogether satisfactory.

"How odd it is that you should care for the society of an old woman like me," she said one day, when Maud had been lamenting over her approaching departure.

"How can you say so, Mrs. Ainslie! It was only the other day I told Lord St.

Leger I had no friend in the world but you—no one who cared for me. Of course I don't mean papa and mamma."

"And did Lord St. Leger agree with you?" asked Mrs. Ainslie gravely.

"No; he talked a great deal of nonsense about it."

"Maud," said her friend, after a moment's silence, "you must not be offended at what I am going to say."

"How could I be? Dear Mrs. Ainslie, you know I could not!"

"I do not feel quite happy to leave you, if Lord St. Leger is in the habit of *talking nonsense* to you."

"I seldom see him, but should be glad of anything that would make you stay with me."

"I only want to give you one piece of advice. In your case—indeed, in the case of every young married woman—all intercourse with young men requires the greatest caution. Your husband may not mind Lord St. Leger's visits, but, believe me, it is far better for you not to encourage them."

"I don't suppose I can tell him not to come," said Maud, rather petulantly; "and he is the only person I can ever speak to."

"Depend upon it, he is not the best person. I had a long conversation yesterday, Maud, with your husband about you."

"What did he say?" she inquired eagerly. "Did he think he had treated me properly?"

"I do not think he sees it exactly in the light we do; but he allows that his not telling you the story of his life was a mistake."

"Only a mistake?"

"Yes, there was evidently no intentional slight, or even mistrust, on his part. He spoke gratefully of your kindness to his daughter. I think your future is very much in your own hands."

"While Stuart is so cold and indifferent?"

"Yes. It is probably only a phase that will pass, if you are patient and gentle."

"But he ought to speak to me about it," said Maud proudly.

"Have you ever explained why you left

him? Dear Maud, in every disagreement there is fault on both sides."

"Did Stuart say anything about Lord St. Leger?" said Maud, after a pause.

"No. I believe he has entire trust in you. I am most anxious that you should never disturb it."

"I never should," replied Maud indignantly. "Thank you, dear Mrs. Ainslie, for all your kindness. What shall I do when you are gone?"

"Mr. Leslie told me that your parents are coming. That will be a great pleasure to you."

"I don't know—I think so—perhaps——"

Mrs. Ainslie looked surprised.

"Of course I like to see papa and

mamma very, very much; only I am afraid it may vex Stuart. Papa is so unsuited to him."

"You must let all that take its chance, dear child. If you act and feel rightly, all will be well. It may take a little time—but you must be patient, Maud, and that virtue is not the easiest for you to practise," said Mrs. Ainslie, with a smile.

"I am afraid not," said Maud. "But I can try. Dear Mrs. Ainslie, must you really go away so soon?"

"I think I must, for my sister is ill and wants me. But you will often write, and, I hope, tell me that your parents' visit has been a comfort to you."

Mr. and Mrs. Hasseldine came a few days after Mrs. Ainslie's departure, and

appeared delighted with all they saw at Carrisbridge. Mrs. Hasseldine expressed her feelings to her husband the evening of their arrival.

"I suppose it is somewhat dull here—but what a comfort to see dear Maud living in such style!"

"I don't care much about *style*, my dear, as long as people are happy. Nothing else matters, and I am sure she was not happy when I brought her from Durham, and I am not quite sure she is much better now. Leslie must explain his conduct to her, and, indeed, why he practised such deception upon all of us."

"Law! Mr. Hasseldine, what does it matter? If he ever had another wife, she was dead and buried long before he mar-

ried our Maud. That was over long ago —why rake it up again?"

"And then that daughter of his?"

"Well, she is dead too, so there is no good in making a fuss about it now, that I can see."

"I don't want to make a fuss, but I shall tell him what I think before I leave, and pretty plainly, too."

Mrs. Hasseldine said nothing, knowing that opposition would only strengthen him in his resolution. Accordingly, after waiting a few days, Mr. Hasseldine thought it incumbent upon him to take the initiative, especially as he had noticed that, beneath Maud's quiet manner, there lay a rankling sore that nothing could heal. He felt sure that some strong remedy was necessary to

remove the weight that pressed upon the mind of his beloved child. Unlike her mother, he cared only for her happiness, apart from every worldly consideration, and he saw that her happiness was, if not actually shipwrecked, in danger of becoming so.

He followed Mr. Leslie into his study, and spoke openly to him of his conduct to Maud, whom he warmly defended. Leslie was startled at the many home-truths he was forced to hear. He had never looked upon his conduct in that light before, and could not altogether deny the charge that Mr. Hasseldine somewhat indignantly brought against him of deception, in the first instance, towards them all, and subsequently of his want of confidence in

Maud, and the insult he offered her as his wife in bringing his daughter into his house without any previous explanation. He also touched feelingly upon the way in which Maud had been treated by Mr. Leslie and his mother, and how opposed her life had been to all that she had fondly anticipated.

Mr. Leslie listened in silence to all that Mr. Hasseldine said. He could not argue with him, and his pride would not allow him to acknowledge that he had been wrong; but he defended himself so far that he denied that he had ever wished to withhold his confidence from Maud, and sheltered himself behind the fact that Maud left her home during his absence, and before he had introduced his daughter at Carrisbridge.

While he briefly defended himself, his mother's words of self-reproach came back to his mind, and if it were not for a sense of injury he might have been less reserved. Though they parted more amicably than seemed possible, Mr. Leslie's manner became colder and more reticent than ever. The fact that anyone should have spoken to him as Mr. Hasseldine did rankled in his mind.

Maud felt this painfully, but, remembering Mrs. Ainslie's words, tried to be patient and to hope that, after her parents' departure, things might alter. To a certain extent they did, and one evening Maud came into the room where her husband was writing.

"Are you busy, Stuart? I came to speak to you."

He silently laid down his pen.

Poor Maud! She had a hard and difficult task before her. Those who are morbid by nature are not easy to deal with.

"I wanted to tell you how sorry I am for having left Carrisbridge without telling you, when I went to Mrs. Ainslie. It did not seem wrong then, but I see it now."

"That is all passed," he said gravely. "I may have been mistaken in not telling you more than I did, but I never contemplated the history of my life becoming known to you in the way it did."

"Oh, how I wish you had, Stuart; but now, as you say, it is all over, I only hope——"

"I think it is useless to say any more about it now," said Stuart coldly, not

noticing the pain and disappointment depicted on Maud's countenance. "If you dislike this place, I am ready to take you elsewhere. It is almost immaterial to me where I am."

"I should be sorry to take you from your home, Stuart, if I can only please you here."

Nothing more was said, and Maud resumed her old life of loneliness and stagnation. She tried hard to be patient, and took every opportunity of being Leslie's companion. In time this had its effect upon him, and she obtained a certain degree of influence. But her life seemed to shrivel under the chilly atmosphere around her, for the dream of her girlhood, the ideal of her youth, had completely passed away.

She knew now that she had been worshipping a shadow—the creation of her own brain, and that she must face her life with all its trials and loneliness, and resolved to do so bravely and patiently. But there were times of depression very hard to bear, though quietness and peace were eventually the result of her endeavours. The blessing of children was denied to her, ardently as she longed for them, and though her husband was not unkind to her, he often appeared cold and indifferent. The freshness of their early mutual love had been rudely rubbed off, nothing remaining but the "dreary intercourse of daily life," for the trust and confidence which are the result of years of happy married life were wanting.

Her early dreams had faded; the ro-

mance of her life gone; but still there was more rest and peace now than in the stormy days of her youth. She felt that her life had been a mistake, and regretted bitterly the impatience and rebellion she had shown in her early married days. Stuart Leslie's health had been failing for some time, and he was ordered always to winter abroad. Maud devoted herself to him entirely, for her heart had never swerved from her first allegiance. She often longed for the comfort of an English home, for they spent some years in travelling. Still her husband's health was her one consideration.

Time passed on slowly, and Maud had to lament the death of her parents, and later on she was deprived of Mrs. Ainslie's loving sympathy.

Leslie's increasing love of seclusion made her life very lonely. He did not live long after their return to England. After his death she took but little interest in anything; her one desire was to follow him. She had learned the lesson of life, and had fought bravely and well. She was still beautiful, though

"Sorrow and gnawing care had left their trace
On the pale chastened glories of her face;
Still in her eyes immortal youth appears,
Unchanged, unaged, undimmed by passing years,
And only gaining radiance through their tears!"

She was often sad, for memory of the mistake of her young life tinged even the present with regret. She never married again, though she had many opportunities of doing so, and eventually took the house Mrs. Ainslie had lived in at Durham, trying to follow in her steps, and devoting

her time to the many good works her friend had begun. Sometimes her life appeared very grey and colourless, but she was content, for "in quietness and confidence was her strength!"

THE END.

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